Pur'p'l Tur'tlz

Music and Mischief in the San Fernando Valley: The '80s & '90s

Foreword by Evan Marcus Rotman

A Memoir by

GREG BROWN

TOO HARD TO HANDLE

A Memoir of the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz

By Greg Brown

with Steve Bryant · Kenny Bellew · Greg Herman · Chris Baustert · Todd Myers · Ron Russell

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DEDICATION

For Steve Bryant and all the Hardshells who rode with us—your spirit, your joy, and your chaos live on in every note.

For Ethel Bryant, who gave us space, grace, and more support than we could ever repay.

And for Ken Bellew, who added the spice.

Foreword

By Evan Marcus Rotman

I'm Evan Marcus Rotman. In the late '80s and early '90s, I was one of the many friends orbiting the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz universe—part fan, part helper, part witness. I wasn't in the band, but I was around for the shows, the house parties, the jams, the flyers, the roadie moments, the afterglow Sundays. I got to watch a local scene become a real community, and a garage band become something bigger than a band: a time and a place you could step into and feel alive.

It was the '80s. The war on (some) drugs was in full swing—but if you were a middle-class white kid, it didn't really touch you. Pot, acid, and coke were readily available to anyone who wanted them. Crack, smack, and speed lurked on the fringes…for the "really bad kids."

If you were in high school or college back then, you probably had friends who were Deadheads. The Grateful Dead's popularity surged in that era, and after years of turning a blind eye to fans taping shows, the band quietly did something that—whether they meant to or not—helped change the music world: they made space for tapers. Tapes were currency. Music wasn't available at a click. Sometimes it took weeks or months of letters and trades with a stranger to score a few highly coveted new recordings.

As those tapes circulated through the college scene and trickled down into high schools across America, the band that everyone loved to hate finally became hip and popular.

(Jerry Garcia once said something like, “We’re like bad architecture or an old whore—if you stick around long enough, it gets respectable.”)

Meanwhile, in a little town called Canoga Park, California (and the surrounding valley towns), a handful of friends started a band and called themselves Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz.

It began as five guys and three chords (more chords came later). There was Kenny Bellew on rhythm guitar—skinny, smiling, usually holding a beer. On lead guitar was Greg Herman, with a teddy-bear persona and an insatiable appetite for long jams. Greg Brown handled keyboards—the true music geek of the band, quick with the quip, with hair so electric it looked like it needed batteries. Chris, followed by Todd, and later Ron held down the drums. And on bass was a skinny, beautiful man named Steve Bryant.

Steve had the biggest stage presence of them all. He played an old Fender P-Bass, usually barefoot, long red locks falling past the middle of his back—locks he eventually cut and donated to a wig company for cancer patients. He bounced around like a top when he played, sweat flying from his brow. “I’M PSYCHED!!!” was his catchphrase. He meant it—and it stuck. His energy could light up whatever room (or backyard) they were in. His basslines sweetened the dance floor the way frosting sweetens a cake.

Now that they had a band, they needed a following. They played every backyard, garage, or living room that would have them. They were the quintessential garage band—the

kind Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage* could've been written about.

Taking a page from the Dead's playbook, they rented a flatbed truck and cruised around the valley to the spots where heads were known to gather. Somehow, they pulled the hippies out of the woodwork and built a real following. It wasn't the Panhandle in San Francisco in 1967… but it was our home-spun, 1980s version of it. It brought out the freaks.

Slowly, the band morphed from a backyard-and-garage band into a club band. An enterprising hippie started a small production company and began promoting shows and weekly club nights. The thing is, the "fans" were mostly our friends—and that meant any of us who weren't in the band might become roadies for a night: schlepping gear, rolling cables, or giving Greg Herman a ride, since he notoriously didn't drive. "Guitar tech" was a loose term; if you could get Herman to the gig, you were his tech (and you got in free).

Greg Brown worked at Kinko's Copies, so there was always a steady flow of flyers, posters, and handmade tickets. A local artist—also a friend and fan—made T-shirts and designed a logo for the band.

They still played some Grateful Dead covers, but more and more originals started showing up in the set. Word on the street was they were even working on a full album of original songs.

The popularity of Pur'p'l Tur't'lz soared. There were plenty of Dead-sounding cover bands in the valley, but the Turt'lz

reigned supreme. They wrote songs with hooks—songs like "Spice," "Peace Of Mind," and "Two Magic Hands"—keeping the beats funky and the vibe alive. They chose their covers well, too: "I'm a Man" (Spencer Davis Group), "Sympathy for the Devil" (The Rolling Stones). And Steve's rendition of "Hard to Handle" was always a crowd-pleaser.

As the crowds grew, club gigs started attracting more mainstream fans, while the house parties became hush-hush. You had to know someone to get invited, or the sheer size of the crowd would blow the whole thing up.

Sundays often landed at a house called The Farm, where we'd BBQ, jam, and relive the weekend's stories. Toward the end of the day, we'd gather for the best 90 minutes on TV: *The Simpsons*, *In Living Color*, and *Married… with Children*. Then we'd crawl home and brace for the week.

It began to feel like a big family—seeing the same faces, week after week—and it was a great vibe. As the '80s came to a close, each band member's persona got clearer, and the band just kept getting better. We followed them all over the SFV, and even as far as Santa Barbara. I seem to remember a gig or two up in Berkeley.

Kenny Bellew had a job driving a box truck delivering Pepperidge Farm cookies—so that truck became the band's gear rig, and there was never a shortage of cookies at the shows.

As their connections widened, they got asked to open for offshoot bands connected to members of the Grateful Dead

and Santana—opening for Bill Kreutzmann, Brent Mydland, and even Bob Weir. It felt like the pinnacle of that era. Things were looking up…until they weren't.

When the '80s turned into the '90s, the scene began to change. Pot, beer, and acid gave way to whiskey, coke, and meth. The drugs that once brought us together started dividing us—trippers and dancers on one side, tweakers and drunks on the other. Some people handled it. Some didn't.

And as the web tightened, the parties that used to end on Sunday night by 9:30 started stretching into Monday or Tuesday. For some, they never really ended.

The band had hit a peak: the music was solid, the fan base was growing, venues mostly took kindly to the scene, and it felt like the next "big step" was right there.

After months of production, money spent, substances consumed, and the classic tale of a manager embezzling what little money there was, the album *Hatched* came out. I can't tell you how many copies sold, but I can tell you the end came not long after its release.

Spin-off bands appeared. Greg and Steve—maybe the two most serious musicians in the group—formed an acoustic duo in the Hot Tuna vein called The Hair Pharmerz (and between the two of them there was enough hair to wig out a cancer ward). Greg later formed a Zappa cover band called B.A.R.F. (Bunch 'A Rude Fuckers). Steve played in a metal/funk band called Edicus and worked the Hollywood club scene.

Some people moved away. Some went deep into white powders. Greg Brown—the de facto leader, maybe mostly because Kinko's made him the band's publicity engine—moved to Santa Cruz to study music. And the band, and the scene, came to an abrupt end.

I ended up tangled in my own legal snares, so I missed what was later considered "the end" of it all.

But none of us who were there will ever forget the magic that was made in our little nook of the SFV in the late '80s. For a brief moment, nobody cared how you voted, what you ate, who you slept with, or what you did for work. It was a magical, innocent era—the kind of youthful exuberance that comes with the sex-drugs-rock-and-roll lifestyle that, if you're lucky, finds you in your late teens or early twenties before life gets too serious. If you're unlucky, one of the three takes over, and you either die, get locked up, or end up sleeping in a park.

I'm grateful to be one of the ones who made it to the other side. I'll hold the memories of those years dearly, all the way to the grave. They made me the man I am today.

And now Greg Brown tells the story from the inside—the music, the mayhem, the brotherhood, the rooms and backyards and parking lots where it all happened. What follows is a time capsule, a love letter, and a reckoning. If you were there, you'll recognize your people. If you weren't, you'll understand why those of us who were will never forget it.

—EMR

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After Steve's first major hospital stay, I visited and found him clear-eyed and on a mission: get the tapes—every hissy bedroom jam, every club board, every park-generator set—digitized and out in the world. He'd always insisted we record, even when the music or the machine wasn't ready. The best shows, of course, slipped through our fingers—that's live music—but so many magical moments (and a few darker ones) survived.

We set up at his place. I showed him how to thread a cassette, snake the deck into his MacBook Pro, arm a track in GarageBand, and upload to my SoundCloud. He was tentative with the laptop at first, then relentless. He burned a CD of every transfer, photographed the old J-cards, and typed memories for each upload—funny, blunt, sometimes heartbreaking.

As he worked, he'd call me and we'd relive the nights together, arguing tempos and laughing at the parts we misremembered. It was exactly what he'd said we'd do when we were old: look back, together.

What follows are Steve's candid notes, paired with the audio—the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Archive—that underwrites our story. *To me, it's a treasure.*

INTRODUCTION

We weren't polished. We weren't on a label. We weren't the sure thing. In a world that prizes neatness and formula, the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz were the wild card—rough, creative, and a little unruly.

From our first messy jam sessions to late-night guerrilla gigs, we chased a dream bigger than ourselves. The music industry loves some stories and leaves others behind. Ours wasn't about contracts or hits—it was about grit, chaos, and magic. About five misfits who refused to quit.

This is our story as I remember it. I've brought in other voices where I can—fans, friends, bandmates—but memory is slippery. I have no doubt Greg Herman, Chris, or Todd would tell parts differently. Steve and Kenny aren't here to ask. What I do have are old tapes, flyers, and fragments of conversations that still carry their spirit.

So this is part memoir, part band history, part love letter to the nights that almost broke us—and the songs that still keep us alive. It's about the moments when we were too raw, too loud, too hard to handle…and maybe exactly who we were meant to be. "Where memory blurs, the tapes speak."

For Steve, for Kenny, and for all the Hardshells who believed we were worth the ride—their spirit hums on every page.

— Greg Brown
Santa Cruz, California · 2025

ONLINE SHELLS & ARCHIVE

For deeper dives, music, photos, and artifacts:

- The Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Archive (audio)
  https://soundcloud.com/greg-brown-37/sets/purpl-turtlz-archive-a-k-a-the
- Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Family on Facebook
  https://www.facebook.com/groups/137835045410
- Photo Archive
  https://www.facebook.com/groups/137835045410/media/photos
- Video Playlist
  https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdfla0zpEqdSHHMBT7AUvWx7QMoxAbE_K&si=IBt_c2utpwVD5og8
- Full Book & Media Bundle (Internet Archive)
  https://archive.org/details/too-hard-to-handle-purp-l-turt-lz-memoir-greg-brown
- Merch & Hard Goods
  https://direct.distrokid.com/gregbrown/

PART I — OVERTURE — PRE–PUR’P’L TUR’T’LZ

We learned to be a band in living rooms and side yards, where teenage bravado met cheap tape and somebody’s older neighbor who “could play slide.” The songs didn’t always have names. One of them borrowed a fistful of Dylan lines on the understanding that theft plus love equals collaboration. What we lacked in technique we made up in momentum—two chords and a dare.

“It’s kind of a song about nothing,” Steve wrote later, “but the Turtlz made it rock.”

That’s how it started: a handful of friends, a few riffs, and a belief that the room would hold.

Chapter 1: The Valley in the ’80s

The San Fernando Valley — summer 1982 — wasn’t the pastel-polo paradise MTV sold to the world. For us it was strip malls, cracked asphalt, and suburban garages that shook with distortion. Ventura Boulevard baked under a ruthless sun by day; by night, the streets ran on neon, car exhaust, cheap beer, and somebody’s older brother’s cassette deck turned up just a little too loud.

You could hear the decade everywhere: Camaros blasting Journey, Van Halen leaking from open garages, radios bouncing off 7-Eleven awnings. But our real religion lived on tape — bootlegs passed hand to hand, album covers stared at like sacred texts. We weren’t chasing Top 40. We were chasing **the feeling**: make it an event, bring your people, share what you’ve got, stretch the night until it feels like a small universe. We were trying to duplicate that, smaller, in a Valley-kid way.

Sanctuary for rejects

Steve Bryant and I didn’t become friends because we were model students. We met at summer band camp, got paired as “catch-up partners” for marching drills, and never actually caught up. By fall we were in Instrumental Instruction for an entire semester — Steve on trombone, me fumbling with French horn — technically learning music, mostly learning how to disappear.

There was a way to climb up into the ceiling where the lights were, vanish into the shadows, and sneak off. Sometimes we

just goofed off. Sometimes we smoked weed like we were auditioning for the world's least impressive crime documentary. Either way, we were already building a skill the band would later depend on: **finding the hidden door**.

We wanted respect that didn't seem available at El Camino. We knew we were cool — at least in our own heads — and we weren't being treated like it. So we started making our own world: tapes, jokes, long conversations, and the growing suspicion that music could be a way out.

Living-room mile zero

After graduation, the dream finally got noisy.

Steve invited me into his mom Ethel's "off-limits" formal living room — plastic-protected couches, polished tables, the whole deal. In the beginning it was *super* off limits. You didn't just wander into that room. But when Ethel was gone, the room changed citizenship. It became the jam room.

That first real night, the constellation aligned: Chris Baustert, Kenny Bellew, Greg Herman, Steve, and me — me still on guitar back then, in the pre-history phase, before the keyboard changed the math.

We pushed the furniture aside and claimed the place like we'd paid rent. We weren't polished. We weren't coordinated. We barely had a shared vocabulary. It was experimental — like five people talking at the same time, but not about the same subject… until the groove occasionally forced us into agreement.

When the amps finally cooled, Steve wiped sweat off his bass and grinned.

“We may suck — but I’m psyched!”

The room that became a dark cathedral

At some point, the living room stopped being a room and became a *setting*. Curtains drawn. Lights low. Smoke hanging in the air like a second ceiling. The place looked like a dark cathedral — but inside a house in the Valley — and we treated it like sacred space.

There were nights we’d chase Grateful Dead songs like they were portals. “Franklin’s Tower.” “Fire on the Mountain.” The way those grooves opened up and kept opening — like the song wasn’t a song, it was a road. We weren’t copying the Dead so much as learning the underlying law: **a band can build a world and invite people into it.**

And then there was the LSD jam — the one that split time. The details blur the way those nights blur, but the conclusion landed with terrifying clarity: this wasn’t just *a* thing we did.

This was **the thing**.

After that, everything else — school, jobs, girlfriends, whatever — started orbiting around the fact that we had found a door and we were not going back through it.

The keyboard that made room

Here’s the part I want to keep straight, because it matters.

In the early pre-history, I was playing guitar. And for a while that meant we had three guitars in the mix — too much of the same color, not enough air between it. The shift happened later, on a trip to Hong Kong with Rob Bragg. That's where I found my first keyboard — the Casio that flipped a switch in my brain and didn't flip back.

The keys didn't just add another instrument. They changed the geometry of the band. Suddenly there was room. Suddenly the sound had width. That keyboard became the reason my return felt real and necessary — like I wasn't just another guitar in the pile, I was the missing lane on the freeway.

Time, work, and the loud life we were trying to live

When I came back into the orbit, I was working at The Competition, the women's clothing store, twelve hours a day. Long shifts. Hard hours. The kind of schedule that makes music feel like a secret you're barely allowed to keep.

That job did buy me something, though: my Jazz Chorus amp. I earned it the slow way — hour by hour, feet on the floor — and then barely had time to play it. I had the amp, the dream, the sound in my head… and almost no hours in the day to turn it up.

It wasn't until I quit that job that the gear stopped being a trophy and started being a weapon.

Clear ash, sacred bass

Steve's first real bass was a clear-ash G&L, given to him by his father. It wasn't just an instrument — it was precious, almost mythic. That bass helped define Steve's whole presence: beautiful tone, big heart, and an intensity that could make a living room feel like a stage.

Let's not rewrite history: we were drinking beer, some of us underage, and we were smoking weed constantly.

One morning the police showed up around six a.m. We all hid, genuinely worried we'd be arrested. Steve looked the police in the eye and deadpanned:

"We're not doing it anymore."

And they left.

It felt like a Jedi moment. We were wired and relieved and stupidly brave, so we started playing again. Eventually the cops came back. Steve delivered the same line again — same calm, same eye contact — and somehow it worked a second time.

Whew. We dodged a bullet.

The band becomes a family

Rehearsals turned into overnight hangs. People needed showers. People needed couches. Herman and Kenny didn't always have great housing, and the band's orbit became a place to land — sometimes for sleep, sometimes just to stay awake all night and feel less alone.

And sure — girls were another goal. Kenny had a girlfriend when we met, but the rest of us were young and trying to meet beautiful people who would love us back. Sometimes we chased romance with the same strategy we used on jams: keep playing until something magical happens.

First songs, first sparks

The earliest originals didn't arrive all at once, and I want to keep the timeline straight: my first song was "Picture Without Words." Later came "Two Magic Hands." Kenny's originals came later too.

But even before the "official songs," the bigger thing was already happening: we weren't just forming a band — we were forming a family.

The Valley gave us our rough edges.
This living room gave us our starting line.
And once that line existed, we couldn't un-cross it.

"Play loud enough and the cul-de-sac becomes the cosmos."
— Steve Bryant, cassette diary, 1981

EARLY CO-CONSPIRATORS: STEVE BROWN, DAN, JIM & GARY

Before the band had a name, before we had a room we could claim, there was my brother, Steve Brown.

If Steve Bryant was the heart inside the rehearsal space, my brother Steve was the force that made me want a life where a rehearsal space mattered at all.

He was the main factor that made me want to play an instrument in a band. He got me into the Grateful Dead. He showed me — by example — that music wasn't just something you listened to. It was something you *went to*. Something you *committed to*. Something you organized your whole calendar and nervous system around.

We went to more than **350 concerts** together, and most of the time he was the one buying the tickets. He didn't just take me to shows — he pulled me into a universe.

And when I started playing my own shows, he stayed in the orbit. He was at more of my gigs than anyone else who wasn't actually in the band. Again and again, there he was: dependable, present, proud in the quiet way that matters. If there's a consistent witness to my entire musical life — outside band members — it's him.

Then there were the co-conspirators who helped keep the doors open and the tape rolling.

Dan Briggs could do everything — act, draw, grab any instrument and make it talk. Jim Ellis showed up with a guitar that looked too beautiful and too grown-up for a living room. And across Marylee, Gary Friedman — my neighbor — shot the photos that prove any of this happened; if the early years have a visual memory, it's his.

From Dan, posted on Facebook:

"I was on that flatbed truck, playing someone's guitar down Ventura Blvd — I swear there was a trip to Hollywood too, but my memory is a messy room now.

Eventually, Kenny turned off my amp (I was horrible).
Stoned and happy, we were in a dream.
I was also at your Country Club shows." — Daniel Briggs

They weren't add-ons; they were part of the weather. The flatbed down Ventura, the stake-bed in the hills, the clubs that felt bigger because familiar faces were in the dark — our band learned to breathe in rooms those friends helped make.

And once there were witnesses, once there were tapes, once there were photos… it stopped being a hang.

It started being a history.

Chapter 2: Roots, Rockets & Rookie Chaos

By the time we understood what we were doing, we were already doing it.

Nights started in a small paneled room — incense, posters, a cracked window letting in warm air and the distant hush of traffic. A tape would be cued up and played like it was instruction, not entertainment. Then we'd turn around and try to build our own version of that feeling with whatever gear we had and whatever nerves we could keep from showing.

We weren't aiming for "tight." We were aiming for **transportation**.

Beautiful chaos, on purpose

Early rehearsals weren't rehearsals. They were weather.

A groove would appear, get chased, fall apart, and then — every once in a while — snap into alignment like all five of us had suddenly agreed on the same sentence. We didn't arrange songs so much as survive them, letting sections melt into each other until something new surfaced. We'd come out of a jam and not totally know what just happened… but we'd know it mattered.

That's where the tapes became the secret weapon. Not as documentation — more like a microscope. We'd listen back and hear moments we didn't recognize while we were playing them. A riff hiding in the noise. A turn that felt accidental

but had a shape. The rewind button was basically a band member.

The Dead in the walls

"Franklin's Tower" and "Fire on the Mountain" weren't just songs we liked. They were lessons. We'd chase those rhythms because they taught you how to stay inside a groove without killing it — how to keep the pulse steady while the colors changed overhead.

And when the room went dark — curtains drawn, lights low — it did that cathedral thing again. Not a club. Not a stage. A living room that felt like a sanctuary built for volume.

After the LSD jam, we started treating the whole operation differently. Not more serious in a corporate way — more serious in a *devotional* way. Like: if this is the thing, then we show up. We protect it. We get better for it.

Too many guitars, not enough air

For a while, the sound had a problem we couldn't solve by "trying harder": too much of the same thing happening in the same space. I was still on guitar in that early stretch — one more guitar in a room already full of them — trying to make my part matter without just getting louder.

The turning point wasn't a brilliant musical decision. It was a real-life accident that became destiny: a trip through Asia with Rob Bragg, and a cheap little keyboard I found in Hong Kong that I refused to leave behind.

Keys didn't just add notes. Keys added air. Suddenly the sound had width. Suddenly there was a place for parts instead of pileups.

At first I played like someone translating in real time — one stubborn left hand at a time. I wasn't trying to be impressive. I was trying to be useful. Over time the keyboard stopped being "the new thing" and became structural — the difference between a jam and a band.

Work, gear, and the time problem

Here's the other pressure that shaped everything: time. I was working brutal shifts at The Competition, twelve hours a day — the kind of schedule that makes you feel like music has to be smuggled into your life.

That job bought me the dream object — my Jazz Chorus amp — but for a while it was almost cruel: I had the amp, and barely the hours to plug in. When I finally quit, it wasn't just relief. It was access.

The band didn't get more serious because we had a meeting about it. The band got more serious because I could finally show up like a musician again.

"Plug me in" becomes the motto

As we started collecting real equipment — stands, cables, mics — the dynamic shifted. You could feel the band trying to become audible, trying to become something that could work outside the room.

There were little territorial moments too — young-band stuff where gear equals identity. Somebody brings a new piece of equipment and suddenly the room rearranges itself around it. I remember staking my spot: I'm here. I belong in the center of this sound.

Plug me in.

And once vocals could actually cut through the roar, the chaos got clearer. Not smaller — **clearer**.

The "Spice" moment (and the tape that caught it)

There's a backyard tape where the jam spills out of "The Other One," and Kenny starts threading a chord shape through the noise. Nobody reacts in real time — we're too busy surfing the wave — but on playback you can hear a song trying to exist. Later it had a title — "Add a Little Spice to Life" — and it stopped being a moment and became a repeatable thing.

That's how a lot of the early material happened: not "someone wrote a song," but the band **discovered** it on tape.

Rookie chaos with a purpose

We didn't just practice — we hunted places to make noise.

One day we bluffed our way into Hughes Junior High by acting like we belonged there, claiming we were doing a "video project." The power tripped mid-song, and instead of stopping we kept going anyway — unplugged, laughing, stubborn, playing to the echo off lockers like it was a venue.

Other nights we rented time in studios and tried to convert raw jams into something that could survive a second listen. Parts started to harden. Songs started to hold their shape. The chaos wasn't random anymore.

It was becoming a method.

The band wasn't just noise — it was survival. Every late-night jam, every blown breaker, every borrowed room was one step toward finding out who we really were.

Interlude I-C: The Masters' Touch — Jazz Theory and Hoodoo Soul

While the MIDI rack was my "refrigerator" and the DX7 was my digital brain, I knew the gear was only as good as the hands on the keys. To ground the tech, I went to the masters.

My formal jazz foundation came from Joanne Grauer. In the L.A. scene, Joanne was a titan—a Juilliard-trained prodigy who had played with Stanley Turrentine and Gabor Szabo.

Sitting at the piano with her was a masterclass in sophistication. She didn't just teach notes; she taught me about "deliciously savvy" structures and how to find a groove that was both funky and "unaffected." She was brilliant and demanding; on the good days, she was breathtakingly clear and loving. From her, I learned the discipline of the L.A. studio world—the precision needed to make a jazz trio "tower above the rest."

Then there was the soul. For that, I went to Ronnie Barron.

Ronnie was a New Orleans legend, a "blue-eyed soul" singer and pianist who had been a key sideman for everyone from Dr. John to Tom Waits and Ry Cooder. Taking lessons from Ronnie was like being baptized in the Mississippi River. He was the original "Reverend Ether," the persona that actually inspired his friend Mac Rebennack to become Dr. John.

Ronnie taught me the "insatiable grooves" of the New Orleans West Bank and how to make a piano "bubble up" and slink in the shadows of a song. If Joanne gave me the architectural blueprints for jazz, Ronnie gave me the "majick stick" for the R&B soul that would eventually define the Tur’t’lz most danceable moments.

Between the academic rigors of UCLA, the sophisticated jazz of Grauer, and the New Orleans "hoodoo" of Barron, I was building a sonic arsenal that was way too big for just a garage band. I was ready for the Palomino. I was ready for anything.

Chapter 3: First Fans, Found Family, and the Grind

By late ’83, the chaos we’d been shaping into a method finally found a target: an audience.

It wasn’t formal. It wasn’t announced the way “real bands” announce things. But the tapes started moving faster than we could track. Flyers stopped feeling like optimism and started feeling like coordinates. A friend of a friend would show up with a six-pack and that look that said: *I heard there’s something happening here.*

And suddenly the living room wasn’t just our lab anymore.

It was a secret venue.

Steve drew a turtle in shades. I scrawled **LOUD / FREE / BYOB** like it was scripture. We hit the neighborhoods with our DIY gospel—Reseda, Winnetka, anywhere we could tape paper without getting caught. Forty-eight hours later, people were knocking like they’d been given a password.

“Is this where the Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz play?”

They weren’t just party crashers. They were tape traders, music nerds, storytellers with strong opinions and better memories than ours. Between songs the real noise wasn’t our amps—it was the debate: which year was the best year, which bootleg was actually a masterpiece, who was “authentic,” who was “a phase,” what counted as a real show, what counted as a real life.

We were playing music, sure. But something else was happening:

We were building a tribe.

It wasn't glamorous. Couches disappeared under strangers. Pizza vanished before it cooled. Somebody always needed a ride. Somebody always needed a place to land. But for the first time I understood how a band could be bigger than its members. Music was the excuse.

Community was the destination.

"They weren't shows; they were turbo-charged living-room potlucks with loud guitars."
— Greg Herman, 2024 interview

Brown Brothers Presents

The crown jewel came one weekend when my folks were out of town.

Somebody scored something "for inspiration," and by nine o'clock the room was sealed—curtains tight, lamps low, that unmistakable feeling like the air had thickened and the house had become its own weather system.

We didn't play a set.

We played a night.

Kenny balanced on the coffee table, wringing whale sounds out of his guitar. Chris treated the floor tom like a ceremonial drum. I held a synth note so long I forgot what key I started in. Dawn arrived and we were tangled in cables, blaming a knocked-over bench on "redecorating."

We called it music. We also knew it was something else: a shared hallucination with a backbeat.

And here's the part that matters—because it became the model:

When you lock the doors, dim the lights, and commit to the groove, the room stops being a room. It becomes a vessel. A dark cathedral in a house. And everybody inside feels it: this isn't background music.

This is *why we're here*.

The characters in the room

As the circle widened, the band started feeling like more than the five of us. The edges got populated.

Rob Bragg showed up in stories and in person—part friend, part orbit—the kind of presence that could turn a normal night into a myth by simply walking into it. People became recurring characters: the ones who always brought food, the ones who always brought extra tapes, the ones who always brought questions, the ones who always brought trouble.

And because we were young and recording everything, those characters didn't just pass through.

They got archived.

The tapes weren't just our sketchbook anymore.

They were our witness.

Crossing scenes

I ended up at Kinko's Copies for a while, and it wasn't just a paycheck. It was part of the Tur't'lz circulatory system. Late nights at the copy machine produced half our flyers, and it's where I met Calvin Black from Urban Dread—a reggae band that was everything we weren't: tight, professional, constantly gigging.

We loved them. One night we tried to mash worlds together—a shared party, shared bill, shared sense that the whole Valley was one big house if you knew the right doors.

Their place felt like stepping into another ecosystem: lights, décor, a vibe that said somebody here knows what they're doing. We opened, they played, then we swapped back and forth: rock into reggae, reggae into rock. The crowd was moving. It felt like a future.

Then it collapsed.

A group barged in—I never fully knew who they were or what they wanted—and the night flipped from celebration to survival. Windows went. Furniture went. The room turned into a fight. We defended our gear with whatever we had, because when you're broke and your instrument is your identity, protecting it doesn't feel optional.

By the time the cops arrived, the party was over in the worst way.

The aftermath had that dead, stunned quiet that follows chaos. It was a reminder: music could build community, but it couldn't always shield us from the world outside the room.

“Beach Babe,” the almost-movie song

Around that same era we got tugged into a side quest: *write a song for a beach movie.*

We didn’t know how legit it was—we just knew it was flattering that anyone outside our cul-de-sac orbit wanted us for anything. So we did the most Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz thing possible:

We tried to write a song to order.

It didn’t quite fit us. It never fully clicked. But I don’t want to lose the truth inside it: Chris Baustert was key in shaping that song, and it exists somewhere in our recordings like a fossil from the period when we were willing to say yes to anything just to see what would happen.

The Hardshells are born

Out of all that madness, our first real fan tribe took shape: the Hardshells.

They weren’t spectators.

They were co-conspirators.

They printed turtle tees, ran flyer missions, helped haul gear, helped feed people, helped keep the whole thing moving. They were couch-surfers, cable-haulers, snack-runners—and sometimes the difference between “we can do this” and “we can’t.”

“Tur’t’lz shows were like mini-Dead lots—food, weird crafts, someone doing something that made no sense until 3 a.m.” — Jerry “Gongles” Gonzales, first-gen Hardshell

Grinding forward

Behind the laughter and the chaos, real life pressed in.

Steve had family responsibilities. Chris and Steve played hooky like it was a second instrument. I went to Pierce College because my parents required it if I wanted to stay at home. Compared to some of my friends, it was a sweet deal—but it also came with pressure: if I was going to take music seriously, it had to be worth their support.

Promotion became an obsession. We printed flyers, stuffed envelopes, and even set up a hotline on Steve’s answering machine:

“You’ve reached the Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz…”

It became part of the lore—not because it was clever, but because it was real effort made audible.

And the art mattered. People like Racer—Tracy—didn’t just make us look legit. She built our visual identity like it was infrastructure: logos, flyers that looked like they came from another planet, merch printed in a garage with the kind of endurance you only see in someone who quietly outworks the room.

That wasn’t “support.”

That was muscle.

The music was the heartbeat. But the family we stumbled into—wild, messy, fragile, unforgettable—was the real story.

Chapter 4: Girls, Couches & 4 A.M. Conversations

Once people started showing up, the band stopped being an activity and became a habitat.

The motivation wasn't just riffs—it was the chase. Kenny was the only one with a steady girlfriend. The rest of us figured the right chord change might conjure romance… or at least someone to split a burrito with. We weren't sophisticated about it. We were young, loud, and convinced the best version of ourselves lived one good night away.

Between "shows," we lived like migrating turtles. Herman and Kenny crashed wherever the amps landed—sofas, throw rugs, the floor, the foot of a bed when the living room overflowed. Sleep was optional; togetherness was mandatory. And if you stayed tangled in the same extension cords long enough, something always happened: a new riff, a new crush, a new argument, a new bond that didn't feel optional anymore.

From rehearsal to ritual

Rehearsals morphed into parties without warning. Laughter bounced off stucco walls, barbecue smoke tangled with feedback, and someone always showed up with just enough confidence to jump in—which meant the chemistry shifted constantly.

Some nights were basically set-building: tighten a section, fix the trainwreck transitions, get the vocals loud enough to matter. Other nights were pure social gravity—the band

playing because the room demanded it, because nobody wanted the night to end, because silence felt like a trap.

Sundays often started as “just a tune-up” and ended as ritual: play until sunset, eat whatever showed up, then collapse into a heap like the house had survived weather again.

It wasn’t rehearsal.

It was therapy disguised as noise.

The couch economy

This is the part a lot of bands never admit: we weren’t just sharing music.

We were sharing survival.

People needed showers. People needed couches. People needed to not go home. In our orbit, housing wasn’t always stable, and the band became a place to land—sometimes for sleep, sometimes just to stay awake until daylight and feel less alone.

You learn a lot about your friends when you see them at 4 a.m. You learn who goes quiet. You learn who gets philosophical. You learn who gets mean when they’re tired. You learn who becomes tender and who becomes a problem. You learn what you can forgive. You learn what you can’t.

And somehow you keep playing anyway.

The 4 a.m. symposium

When the gear was finally stowed, the real set began: the talk.

We argued about music like it was theology. We tried to solve love like it was a chord progression. We diagnosed the future, predicted the past, confessed things we'd never say in daylight. Someone would notice the first streaks of sunrise and mumble, "One more tune?" and before anyone could answer, the instruments would be in hands again.

Those rent-free arenas—garages, living rooms, carports—were where music and friendship fused. Steve documented everything on cheap cassettes and whatever video gear he could keep running, sometimes leaving it on long enough that we forgot it was there. The archive caught the missteps, the laughter, the accidental brilliance, the fights, the reconciliations—the unglamorous truth of a band becoming a life.

By early '84, our ragtag noise was sharpening into a band. Handwritten set lists replaced scribbled scraps. Broken strings got swapped mid-week instead of ignored. The misspelled banner—**Pur'p'l Tur't'lz**—wasn't just a sound anymore.

It was a flag.

And once a flag exists, the world starts testing whether you can carry it.

Chapter 5: Backyards, Beginnings & Breakthroughs

By mid-'84, owning a lawn mower meant owning a venue.

Most evenings we hauled amps into somebody's backyard—driveways, patios, even empty lots—looking for one working outlet and praying the neighbors were out of town. Cinder blocks became speaker stands. Extension cords ran through sprinklers like we were daring electricity to kill us. Charcoal smoke tangled with cheap weed as dusk slid toward curfew.

Chris's kit rattled fence boards. Steve Bryant's bass thumped into our sneakers. Kenny's guitar cut a clean line through the haze. And me—I wedged my keys wherever they fit, sometimes balanced on patio furniture like a bad dare, trying to make a keyboard feel inevitable in a world that still wanted us to be "just guitars."

We'd stumble through a cover or two to get the room warm, then test-drive originals. Mistakes weren't accidents; they were part of the show. By the third song, the lawn turned into a slow-dance floor and a meditation circle at the same time—people swaying, somebody laughing too hard, somebody staring at a porch light like it was the moon.

Backyards weren't glamorous.

But they were ours.

Every fence line felt like a stage. Every porch light was an accidental spotlight. And every night we proved something small and important: the band didn't need permission.

The van & the burden

My Toyota Celica could barely carry my own gear, let alone a band's worth of chaos. So I made the "practical" move: I bought a Ford Econoline van—basically a camper on wheels.

Perfect in theory.

In practice, it meant one thing: **I was the driver.**

I picked everyone up, dropped everyone off, loaded the amps, and ran the circuit night after night. Herman rode shotgun, talking without breathing—Dead lore, oddball prog obsessions, whatever fuel kept him going—while I white-knuckled through Valley traffic, trying not to kill my bandmates before we even got to the gig.

In my private fantasy of stardom, a tour bus came with a driver.

Instead, I was chauffeuring the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz in circles around Reseda.

The van smelled like sweat, beer, and blown speakers. It was also where half our bad ideas turned into actual plans. That rolling box was rehearsal before rehearsal—arguments, jokes, setlist dreams, and the unspoken agreement that we were all in, even when "in" was inconvenient.

Holiday fireworks

Our backyard circuit had landmark nights—little myth stones you can still trip over decades later.

On the Fourth of July in Granada Hills, we turned a pool party into patriotic pandemonium. Bottle rockets and

Roman candles stitched the sky while we tried to keep a groove alive—until a cop's megaphone cut straight through the music:

"Pack up in fifteen, or we impound everything!"

We moved faster than I've ever seen us move. Not because we were scared of getting in trouble—because we were scared of losing the gear. You can survive a busted party. You can't survive a missing PA.

Other nights were at Ethel's. Sometimes my parents escaped to Palm Springs and the house became a stage. Dennis Adkins's shoebox rental became party HQ—sessions that ran long enough to blur into the next day. People showed up with tape recorders and cameras like the Valley had decided to stand close to the noise just to see what would happen.

Halloween under lights

Halloween '84 pulled us indoors when The Wildest invited us to open at the L.A. Cabaret—a tiny comedy club that suddenly felt like Carnegie Hall because it had a stage and a real schedule.

Our flyers had done their job. The room filled with tie-dye, skeleton masks, pirate hats—our people, somehow, in a real club. The stage was barely big enough for Chris's kit and our amps, but it didn't matter. We opened strong, then dropped an original early enough to learn something important:

We weren't just a backyard phenomenon.

At some point I spotted my brother **Mark** and his wife **Susie** dancing—actually there, in person—and it hit me hard. Of course it was his birthday. October 31. But still. There's a special shock in seeing your "real life" and your "band life" collide under club lights.

And then there was my other brother—**Steve Brown**—the one who lit the fuse in the first place.

Steve was the reason I wanted to play in a band at all. He got me into the Grateful Dead. He was my concert partner for the long haul—350+ shows together, most of the tickets bought by him, most of the nights made possible by his simple, stubborn belief that music was worth chasing. And he showed up to my gigs more than anyone who wasn't in the band. That kind of loyalty isn't background. It's scaffolding.

When your brother keeps showing up, night after night, it quietly tells you: *This is real. Keep going*.

Not long after, we played behind It's Only Rock & Roll Records on Ventura Boulevard. Milk crates became a stage. Tie-dye sheets became a backdrop. Record bins inside, our turtle logo outside. We opened for The Wildest again, and the line between "party band" and "real band" blurred a little more.

Clubs didn't have sprinklers shorting out the power or landlords leaning over the fence.

They had something else: **expectation.**
Start on time. Finish on time. Prove you belong on the bill.

Breakthroughs

Backyards were wild and free, but rooms full of strangers offered a different kind of validation. When people stayed for the second set—or shouted for an encore—it landed harder than applause from a party that had nowhere else to go.

Still, I don't want to romanticize one "big moment." The breakthroughs came from repetition: night after night, lawn after lawn, room after room, learning how to keep the band moving even when the night didn't cooperate.

We were becoming reliable—without losing the danger.

We weren't just learning how to be a band.

We were learning how to last.

Hansen Dam — Our Own Little Dead Show

Hansen Dam Recreation Area — band shell

Steve Bryant (intro to the tape):
"This is part of the second set at Hansen Dam… one of the many free shows we did to try to say thank you — we love you. Lots of Dead songs, and lots of improvisation… so check it out and tell your friends, and tell us what you think, ok? Right on — thanks."

Some gigs you get invited to.

Others you hustle your way onto.

And then there are the ones you create because you want them to exist.

Hansen Dam was that.

It wasn't a club. It wasn't a backyard. It was a band shell in a public park, and the idea was simple: play free, play long, and make it feel huge. These were shows we put on ourselves—our way of saying thank you to the people who kept showing up.

We didn't treat it like a casual park jam. We hired a sound company and put a real PA in the open air. The concrete shell turned into our little amphitheater, and for a few hours the park became our room.

Our people were good at parks. They showed up like a moving color field: tie-dye, bare feet, familiar faces. Some danced right up front. Others lay back on the grass and soaked it in. There was plenty of Dead in the DNA—long improvisation, the freedom to stretch out and see where the music wanted to go.

This is where **Franklin's Tower** and **Fire on the Mountain** stopped being "covers we love" and became an operating system. You could feel the crowd lock in on the same internal compass: *don't rush it, don't choke it, let it open.*

And that openness—out in daylight, with no roof, no last call, no neighbor pounding a wall—changed the band. Without a clock on the wall, the music stopped being nervous. Songs

could breathe. Jams could wander way out and still find their way home because nobody was forcing the landing.

People partied hard. But what I remember most is the tone: positive, friendly, self-contained.

Weird without being mean.

Hansen Dam is also where we got captured the way it actually felt.

A friend of mine from Kinko's—Sarge—took the only photos we have from one of those events. They're some of the best images of the group: the banner, the gear sprawled like we'd moved in, the band mid-flight, the crowd turning pavement into a dancefloor in full daylight. Looking at them now, you can almost hear the air moving.

If the early years were about learning to play together, and the club years were about learning to survive inside the machine, then Hansen Dam was something else:

It was us, for us, with our people—

our own little Dead show under the sun.

Artifact Interlude: The Brent Letter (Summer 1990)

When Brent Mydland died, it didn't just feel like a band member was gone—it felt like a color had been removed from the world. Not only the keyboard tones, but the human part: the edge in the voice, the ache, that bright-strained energy that could make a chorus lift off the ground.

I was in my twenties and living in the Valley, running on music, urgency, and the specific kind of confidence you can only have before life humbles you into editing your thoughts. I'd already spent years inside the messy miracle of being in a real band—rehearsals, gigs, drive time, gear, arguments, breakthroughs, the long stretches where you don't know if anything is "happening" until you realize it's all happening, every night, in inches.

So I did something absurd and completely sincere:

I wrote a letter to the Grateful Dead.

Not a fan letter. Not a condolence note.

A job application.

I told them I was sorry for "our loss," because that's how it felt—like grief that belonged to anyone who'd ever had their life rearranged by a song. And then I pivoted into the pitch: I play keys, I sing, I can improvise, I can rock a crowd.

I mailed them a copy of *Hatched*—the record my band had released—and I pointed out that all the keyboard parts were mine. Bio. Photos. The whole packet, like a kid trying to talk his way into the big leagues with nothing but a stamp and a belief that the world is still porous.

The weird thing is:

They wrote back.

The reply wasn't an invitation. It wasn't a phone call. It was official, brief, and polite—the kind of letter an organization

sends when it needs to close a door without slamming it. Too many inquiries. They looked close to home. An old friend got the job. They were returning my tape with best wishes, signed by Cameron Sears.

And still—

They answered.

That's the part that stuck with me over the years. Not that I didn't get an audition. Of course I didn't. The band was grieving, and the keyboard seat wasn't a Craigslist listing. It was family, history, chemistry, trust.

But here's what my younger self got right: sometimes the only way to survive a moment like that is to make a move. To turn grief into momentum. To throw your name into the wind and see what comes back.

What came back was a letter—

and a small proof that I'd once been brave enough to bet on my own music with no guarantee of anything.

Chapter 6: The Name Game Evolves

After a while, we needed a name that could survive outside the room.

One day at Shoup Park, Herman tossed out the obvious:

“Purple Turtles?”

Steve Bryant lit up like we’d just found another hidden door.

And I did what I always do when something feels too normal:

I messed with it.

Dropped vowels. Bent it toward phonetics. Made it look wrong on purpose.

Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz.

It looked strange. It sounded stranger. And it stuck.

From that moment on, we weren’t trying to blend in. The name did what a good band name should do: it made people ask questions. Sometimes they asked how to pronounce it. Sometimes they just laughed.

Either way, they remembered it.

Guerrilla branding

Marketing wasn’t budgets or strategy.

It was toner, tape, and streetlights.

We plastered telephone poles and pizza-parlor cork boards with turtles in shades and ransom-note lettering. Our art-scene allies—Racer, Vegetable, Achim, Saffron—turned the

flyers into psychedelic artifacts: collage, hand lettering, impossible color, little jokes that made you stare long enough to absorb the date and time.

Kinko's became a nerve center. Flyers got born there, and the name started leaking into other scenes. The misspelled turtle began showing up where it didn't "belong": on binders, jackets, backstage doors, bathroom walls.

Sometimes the apostrophes wandered. Sometimes people dropped half the letters.

It didn't matter.

The point was the flag.

The name becomes a password

Once it spread, the name turned into shorthand.

Bookers squinted at it, tried to say it out loud, shrugged, and put us on the bill anyway. Kids compared origin stories: a flyer, a cassette, a friend's older brother, a backyard you found by rumor.

You didn't have to spell it right to belong.

You just had to show up.

And once people start showing up for a name—not just a party—you find out fast whether you're real.

Chapter 7: The Band Stops Being a Theory

By the time we hit ’84, the revolving door of jam sessions had steadied into something more permanent.

Five of us—Kenny, Herman, Steve, Chris, and me—started showing up like we meant it. Same faces. Same gear. Plug in and go.

And one night it stopped feeling like “a great hang” and started feeling like a band.

We launched into “Scarlet Begonias,” and for once there were no awkward resets, no half-arguments mid-verse, no drifting into the weeds before the chorus even arrived. Steve hit the bass hard enough it felt like the room moved, then turned and shouted his trademark:

“I’M PSYCHED!”

It was goofy. It was also true. That shout became an ignition switch—our reminder that the point wasn’t perfection.

The point was commitment.

Rehearsal kingdoms

Our rehearsal spots were borrowed spaces, which gave every night a charge of urgency.

Ethel’s formal living room was our first headquarters—loud, off-limits, temporary. My parents’ place became a stage whenever they escaped town, with the unspoken rule that we’d vanish before they returned and the neighbors could build a case against us.

Knowing we could lose the room at any time made us play harder.

We didn't waste the night.

Chris's drums boomed off stucco walls, patched together from whatever kept them standing. Kenny's guitar was already a laser beam—sharp attack, perfectly timed grins. Herman played like he was narrating the night in fuzz. My keys were still cheap and stubborn, but they started finding their place under the guitars instead of fighting them.

And Steve—equal parts thunder and charm—held the whole thing together.

The first originals that stuck

Covers were our common language.

Originals were the claim we were trying to stake.

The early songs didn't arrive like lightning bolts. They arrived like discoveries: a riff that wouldn't die, a chorus that survived three rehearsals, a line that made us laugh and then refuse to delete it.

"Nowhere to Turn" started feeling less like an experiment and more like a statement. "Get Up (And Do It)" gave us swagger. "Skipping Through the Lily Fields" carried Herman's strange, dreamy stamp.

We were still figuring out structures, bridges, endings. Sometimes a "new song" was just a shape we kept returning to.

But the intent had changed.

We weren't only stretching jams anymore.

We were trying to write.

The push toward real gigs

That's also when someone finally showed up talking like the world outside our rooms was a real thing.

Enter Steve Miller—no, not that Steve Miller, though we didn't mind the confusion.

He was a few years older and carried a spiral notebook stuffed with contacts and schemes. He didn't talk about tone or vibe. He talked about guarantees, load-in times, drink tickets, start times, and what it meant to be professional enough to get asked back.

He also talked about the Grateful Dead constantly, which meant we trusted him immediately.

But the important part was this:

He turned our beer-soaked promises into actual dates.

Suddenly there were gigs on the calendar that weren't house parties—opening slots, club nights, real rooms with sound techs who did not care about our mythology.

It was the first time someone treated us like a band instead of a hangout.

And once that starts, the world tests you.

Not with romance.

With logistics.

That’s when you find out if you’re real.

Field Note — Larry Saltman

Notes from the journals of Larry Saltman — "Purple Tur't'lz Open for Go Ahead in 1986"

Larry Saltman was one of those early Hardshells who didn't just show up — he worked. When the Turtl'z opened for Go Ahead at Chuck Landis' Country Club in Reseda (1986), Larry was pulled into stage-managing the night. What follows is Larry's memory from his journals, in his own words.

We were all raving deadheads having a good time with the music – the scene – and, most of all; with each other. In 1986 I had become an avid fan of the Grateful Dead and a working fan of the Turtl'z. Shortly after getting into the Dead, I met a couple guys that would become lifelong friends; DA and Bubba. I'll share more about these truly great friends another time. DA was hosting the Purple Turtl'z, giving them a place to play in the living room of his house in the early 80's. It was a great scene.

We were all on the same page and enjoyed delving into all that the 'turned on' GD crowd had to offer. I found in the guys in the Purple Turtl'z (PT) a special kinship. Right around 1984, I was hollering for more at PT concerts and found myself helping them pack up, set up and whatever

they needed. Their personal crowd was fun and I swiftly gravitated to them.

Right before the summer of 1986, Jerry Garcia had lapsed into a diabetic coma after some drug abuse and the band started doing 'side shows' as Go Ahead and Kingfish; with Kingfish being a passion project for Bob Weir. Of course, we ate it up – wanting anything we could get to stoke the fires of our passion for the vibe that allowed us to be ourselves and the music to bound us. Things in our lives became less important than being a part of what was going on. PT were heavily influenced by the Dead and local folks (like me) dove head first into any event that smacked of that vibe.

A guy named Kenny started a promotional effort he named "Why Knot Productions" and promoted many PT performances. Kenny worked with Steve Miller (another true friend and a Manager of PT) to pull together a number of events for the PT. I acted as a grip for many of them. The best of those gigs was the time the PT opened for Go Ahead, which served as a prequel act to the Kingfish performance.

This happened at 'Chuck Landis' Country Club' in Reseda, Ca; my stomping grounds. I grew up a mile or so from the venue. As a teenager, my crowd partied on the streets of Reseda, Van Nuys, and – in general – the San Fernando Valley - Late 1983, which I will refer to as "The Valley".

You'll find my various adventures as a teenager in the valley in other notes of mine, but let me assure you: we had lots of fun on the streets. Drinking, fighting, loving, drug abuse and lots of 'hero worship' music.

Music was just starting to change, where old school rockers like Rick Derringer, Edgar Winter, George Thorogood were singing about getting laid and drinking was shifting to more of a hippy vibe (although with the same theme). When the Dead came into my life, everything changed.

Flash forward to 1986 and Jerry is in the hospital in a diabetic coma and Why Knot productions and the PT got a gig with side projects of the healthy (?) members of the GD. I was supporting them both. Kenny asked me to stage manage the event.

I'm going to refrain from going into the absolutely over the top drug/alcohol use by everybody back stage, other than to say it happened and I was a part of it. As part of my 'job' (I was paid $0 for the gig), I herded acts on stage, helped with moving equipment and kept an eye on the behavior back stage. I may not have been the best person for the job, but I took my basic responsibilities seriously. The way I saw it, it was my job to hustle the bands on and off stage and make sure our guests – namely Bobby Weir, Brent Mydland and Bill Kreutzmann – were comfortable.

Brent and Bill were having a great time backstage; slugging beers and partying it up with the locals. Bobby, however was much more private; staying alone in the 'grand' suite of the back stage area. The area Bobby was in hanging in was a

back stage room that looked like a cheap motel with a wet bar.

I checked on him a couple times and he was fine until – one time - he gave me a weird look. After asking him if he was OK again, he said nothing, but looked past me. A local Deadhead was squatting in the corner, behind the door – staring at Bobby. I told the dude, whom I recognized from PT concerts, to get the fuck out – and he did.

The PTs were finishing their set and Go Ahead was getting ready to play. Go Ahead was made up of Billy, Brent and a couple session musicians. Bobby stayed up stairs until he was called for his performance in his own 'sideband', Kingfish. Kingfish used all the same musicians with Bobby joining them to take the lead.

Everything went great. The vibes – and our intoxication level - was through the roof. Go Ahead finished their set and Bobby came down stairs from his room to join the band for a rendition of Kingfish. Immediately, everyone back stage – and I mean everyone, including my 'employer', Kenny – was all over Bobby.

I shouted the crowd down and demanded that they all get behind the red line that was painted on the floor about six feet away from the stage - for just this reason. As I expected, they all fell in line and backed off of Bobby. Bobby, who was visibly relieved, turned to me and thanked me for my actions. I mentioned to him that they really didn't mean harm, they just loved him and were usually separated by thousands of people. He thanked me again and hit the stage.

The set was great, everyone danced their asses off and worked up a sweat, throwing it around as the music took all of us away.

After Kingfish finished, their roadies were breaking down the equipment. I saw that Billy was yelling at their crew and spun a drum skin at one of his guys. Jumping in, I asked Billy what his problem was and he yells at me that, “these fuckers didn’t buy beer and now the club won’t sell it to us!” The show ended well after 2:00 AM, the cut off for sale of alcohol.

Dropping all of my responsibilities to Kenny and Why Knot Productions, I told Billy, who was now joined by a pissed off Brent, that I had a cooler full of beer in my truck that I couldn’t touch all night, as I was so busy.

Billy and Brent perked right up. Asking where this beer might be. I showed them to my truck, immediately out the back door of the Country Club.

We sat on my tailgate drinking beer and sharing a couple doobies and my (always handy) flask of bourbon until the sun started showing. I still have the drum skin Billy spun at his grip.

By any measure in my life, this was a memorable event for me. Apparently, I was not alone in this memory. The following summer, Jerry had bounced back from his diabetic coma, learned to play the guitar again and made it to the following summer tour.

My buddy, Happy Dave (the happiest Dave I have ever known), had just bought an old Blue Bird school bus and was shy to drive it. I drove the beast to the Ventura show that summer and we managed to secure a great parking place directly in back of the backstage area of the concert.

Again, I will defer further story telling of the tremendous events of the weekend for another time - with exception of this wee tidbit. A stretch limo pulled into the small camping area we had parked the bus and, as the back door opens to let out the occupants; a huge German Shepherd comes out of no where and, snarling, jumps into the limo, attacking the passengers. Without a thought, I jumped into the limo and grabbed the shepherd by his collar and threw him over my shoulder, where he welped away. Brent Mydland looks up at me from the back of the limo and asks, “Larry?”.

Larry’s “red line” detail says a lot about that era: the love was real, the boundaries weren’t, and sometimes the difference between chaos and magic was one person paying attention.

Chapter 9: Camp Templin — Where the Shell Got Hard

After opening for Go Ahead, we weren't hungry for bigger *numbers*—we were hungry for bigger *air*.

The Valley was starting to feel like a box: too many rules, too many walls, too many clocks. Clubs had last call, neighbors had complaints, and even our best nights came with an invisible hand hovering over the breaker switch.

So we chased the oldest solution we knew:

Get out of town. Bring the gear. Make a world.

That world became Camp Templin, tucked west of Castaic Lake, where scrub pines replaced streetlights and a generator's hum was the closest thing to a blessing.

We caravanned up the Grapevine with amps, kegs, coolers, and extension cords coiled like snakes. By the time we rolled in, the clearing was already alive—VW buses in circles, campfires throwing orange light on tapestries, the whole place vibrating with that pre-show feeling: anything could happen because nothing was managed.

And for a while, it was exactly what we were chasing.

Music echoing through the trees. Strangers becoming friends. A bunch of cul-de-sac Deadheads turning into cosmic voyagers for a night. The band played deep, loose, fearless—like the woods had removed the ceiling from our sound.

Then something shifted.

Templin didn't just feel wild. It felt **unfenced**. And unfenced is where the beautiful things live… right alongside the things with teeth.

There's a moment in this story that doesn't belong to my voice alone. It belongs to somebody who was there that night, early in the tribe, watching the dream happen in real time.

So I'm going to hand the mic to one of the first true Hardshells: **Phil Ide.**

Phil Ide's Memory of Templin Station

Phil's version starts exactly where ours did—mid-'80s Valley kids, Reagan on TV, LSD and the Grateful Dead cracking open a new map. He talks about the tribe we were trying to join: the whole menagerie of Deadheads—hippies, bikers, chemists, intellectuals, pirates, adventurers—everybody chasing the same sunshine daydream in a thousand different costumes.

He remembers how the scene traveled before phones did: word of mouth, record store bulletin boards, flyers, mailed announcements—the grapevine, literal and metaphorical.

And he remembers the drive up to Templin: cooler full of sodas (too young to score booze), snacks, super-sized M&M's courtesy of his mom… plus "other sacraments," because this was the era of bold sincerity and questionable planning.

When the band hit, Phil says it felt like lift-off—dust, dancing, trance-state joy. Time standing still. Bodies turning into one spinning organism around a sound.

But then he noticed a new presence—older, grittier, louder in the wrong way. A guy pushing powders, acting belligerent. It was the kind of energy you might expect at a giant Dead lot, but it landed different here because this was supposed to be *ours*. Smaller. Safer. Home-field weird.

Phil's memory reaches for a sentence I recognize in my bones:

The night had magic… until it didn't.

Back from the edge

What happened next didn't feel like the Valley anymore.

That was the point of Templin—to get away from curfews, owners, neighbors, "last call," and every other rule that made freedom feel rented.

Templin taught us the price tag that can come with freedom when it's totally off-grid: the beauty is real, and so is the danger.

After that night, we still wanted the magic. We still wanted the *no one can tell us to stop* feeling.

We just stopped pretending the wilderness was automatically safe because it looked beautiful in the dark.

Field Note: The Lot Shows

Templin didn't kill the dream—it sharpened it.

We still wanted the off-grid current, but we started looking for places where freedom came with fewer unknown teeth. That's where the lot shows came in: the gathering outside the gathering, the tribe assembling in asphalt daylight—vans, coolers, tapes, merch, chemistry, philosophy, and the shared hunger to keep the music going even when the official doors weren't open for us.

We didn't call them "lot shows" at first.

We just kept finding ourselves in that in-between space—between the event and the real event—where the rules got blurry and the community got loud.

And there were two that became legend in our world.

One in Ventura. One in Irvine.

Same impulse: if we couldn't get inside, we'd build the stage outside.

Chapter 10: The Lot Shows

By the time we started calling them “lot shows,” it wasn’t a joke anymore.

A lot show wasn’t a concert. Not exactly. A concert had a stage, a schedule, somebody with a clipboard, and rules that looked good on paper. A lot show was the opposite: music as a rumor. A temporary village built out of tailgates, thrift-store amps, borrowed extension cords, and the kind of optimism you only have when you don’t fully understand consequences yet.

Two different years. Two different venues. Two different versions of us.

Same basic deal:

We weren’t supposed to be there.

And yet—somehow—there we were.

Ventura

The Ventura lot show started like a dare, the kind of dare that only works because nobody wants to be the person who says no.

Someone said, “We should bring gear.”
Someone else said, “No way. They’ll shut it down.”
And then the third voice—the chaos voice—said, “Cool. I’m bringing gear.”

That’s youth math.

We arrived early enough that the asphalt still looked sleepy. The sun was just climbing. Cars rolled in slow. Trunks opened. Coolers appeared. People nodded at each other with that instant recognition: *Oh. You're here for the same thing I'm here for.*

And we did the universal loophole:

We didn't "play a show."

We **set up**.

Setting up is innocent. Setting up is just plugging things in. Setting up is just checking levels. Setting up is just a few chords to see if the amp is alive.

And if a small crowd happens to gather while you're doing that… well, that's not your fault. That's physics.

The first notes always felt like they came from the gear itself, like the equipment wanted to speak.

A guitar line floated out over the cars. A drum pattern answered from whatever was available. Steve's bass found the pocket and suddenly the whole thing snapped into place: a groove became an announcement.

The parking lot had a pulse.

Ventura had a kind of innocence. People drifted closer like curious neighbors. The circle formed politely. The vibe was warm—more "community picnic" than "scene."

Even so, the shadow was there. It always is. In any lot there are edges: the ones who are too loaded too early, the ones scanning for trouble like trouble is their hobby.

But in Ventura, it stayed mostly theoretical—rumor at the perimeter.

What I remember is the feeling that we'd created a room without walls.

And once you do that, even once, you start chasing it.

Irvine Meadows

The Irvine lot show was the same story in a different key.

The place already had momentum when we arrived. You could feel it—like the asphalt had a memory. This lot had *history*. Not official history, not plaque history, but scene history—the kind you can feel in how fast people gather and how little they pretend they're not eager.

The crowd was bigger, quicker, less polite about forming. In Ventura, people wandered over. In Irvine, they arrived like they'd been promised something—and now they were here to collect.

We were older too—older meaning slightly more confident and slightly more delusional. That's the danger zone: competent enough to pull it off, not wise enough to be careful.

We got sound fast. Someone counted off. We hit the first groove and it felt like the lot leaned in.

Irvine had more edge. More characters. More voltage. More "what could go wrong" baked into the atmosphere. There were moments I caught myself scanning—not for applause, not for approval—but for signals: the guy getting too worked up, the couple arguing hard enough that everyone nearby pretends not to hear, the person wandering through the gear area like boundaries are optional.

And then there was the other layer—the invisible authority. In Ventura we felt under the radar. In Irvine it felt like the radar was already pointed at us and we were waiting for the sweep.

That tension did something to the music.

It made it urgent.

We played tighter. Louder. Like if we stopped, the spell would break and the reality of the parking lot would come crashing back in.

There was a moment—song title doesn't matter, *moment* matters—when the groove locked so hard it felt like the crowd moved as one organism. Not a mosh. Not chaos.

A shared pulse.

And for a few minutes, everything made sense.

That's the drug.

The danger is you start believing you can live there. That if you just recreate that moment often enough, you'll be okay. That it will fix whatever's broken. That it will justify the

miles, the sleep deprivation, the fights, the ridiculous logistics of hauling gear into places never meant to hold a band.

But the lot show doesn't love you back.

It just happens.

And then it's gone.

Two lots, one lesson

Ventura taught me the holy side: music as an invitation, joy as a shared secret, a band turning asphalt into a stage.

Irvine taught me the real side: when you light up a place with sound, **everything** shows up—tender, messy, beautiful, dangerous.

Both were true.

In both lots, I remember the way people looked at us—not like *entertain us*, but like:

thank you for making this happen.

That look stays with you.

It can also trick you into thinking you're invincible.

We weren't.

Nobody is.

But for a couple hours—two different years, two different venues—we lived inside a world we built ourselves. A concert

with no walls. A community with no address. A miracle with an extension cord.

And a reminder, every single time, that the best parts of it were temporary.

Which is exactly why we kept doing it.

Chapter 11: First Club Nights — The Palomino Door

By late ’84, the backyards were starting to feel like reruns.

Not because they weren’t fun.

Because we could do them in our sleep.

We knew how to build a room out of a lawn and one working outlet. We knew how to summon a crowd with flyers and rumor. We’d even pushed past the edge of the map and learned what that cost.

If the band was going to grow up, we had to step into rooms with real lights, sticky floors, and start times that didn’t care about our mythology.

After Halloween and the alley gig behind It’s Only Rock & Roll Records, the ambition got sharper.

There was one name that kept coming up:

The Palomino Club.

The Palomino wasn’t just a bar—it was a shrine. Stories lived there: the neon horse, the legends, the feeling that real careers had brushed those walls. For a bunch of misfit Deadheads from the Valley, the idea of seeing our crooked turtle name connected to that room felt like science fiction.

We started hearing the same sentence over and over:

“If you really want to be taken seriously, you’ve got to get into the Pal.”

Steve Miller—our manager—scribbled contacts into his spiral notebook like he was cracking a safe.

And then—like half the best Valley stories—the door didn't open through a big pitch.

It opened through Kinko's.

Carl at Kinko's

Kinko's wasn't just my paycheck. It was part of our circulatory system. Flyers were born there. Last-minute miracles happened under fluorescent lights.

That's where I met Carl.

He came in to prep the Palomino's weekly newspaper ads—band names, spacing, deadlines, the kind of precision that looks easy until you've watched someone do it for real. Sometimes he had me cut stacks of tickets so they'd look clean. He'd make calendars too—month-at-a-glance sheets with every band booked, trimmed and stapled like the room's future had to be assembled by hand.

It was basically the Palomino's nervous system, printed and built right there on our tables.

And I already loved that room. I'd been to shows there. I'd watched Albert Collins tear the roof off. I'd seen Bruce Willis get up and jam. It was the kind of place where legends felt normal and surprises didn't feel rare.

So while we were trimming and stacking and lining things up, I did what any hungry young musician would do:

I told Carl I had a band.

He didn't give me a speech. He didn't promise anything.

He just…

got us an opening slot.

Crossing the border

Walking into the Palomino with our gear felt like crossing an invisible border.

The maple stage. The long bar. The low ceiling stained with decades of smoke and music. Everything in that room whispered the same thing:

Don't waste this.

We weren't country. We weren't slick. Our name still looked like a typo.

But we were inside.

Over time, the Palomino became a home base. Burt and his partner Mack started booking us not only there, but into rooms in the same orbit—often south of L.A.—where the load-in was long, the drive was longer, and you learned quickly what "professional" actually meant.

Eventually we could do our own nights: invite guests, build a whole evening around our crowd, have familiar staff and a familiar room where the Hardshells could land.

Hard lessons under neon

The Palomino also taught me that magic comes with consequences.

One night I got seriously sick mid-show—so sick I had to leave before I packed up my gear. The band packed my stuff, but my AKG mic got left behind.

Later, I asked Carl about it.

He showed me a box full of abandoned microphones and said, “Which one is yours?”

Mine wasn’t there.

That one hurt. It was a lesson: take care of your gear, take care of your body, and don’t assume the blur will hand you a clean second chance.

That night Gwen and Sam took me back to their place and tried to help, but I ended up needing a doctor:

walking pneumonia.

I’d never had to learn that lesson on a gig before.

I’ve never forgotten it.

One door opens another

Once we were connected to the Palomino world, other doors opened too. I could book my Zappa band, BARF, into rooms that would’ve been harder to reach otherwise.

That’s how it worked: one relationship became a path, one gig became another, one door opened two more.

Those first club nights didn’t erase our backyard DNA.

They translated it.

And once we were inside rooms where things could happen, we started realizing something else:

The rooms weren't the point.

They were the beginning of the next test.

Chapter 12: The Palomino and Rick Rubin

By the time we played a real showcase at the Palomino, we already understood what that room meant—not because we'd memorized the legend, but because we'd carried amps through those doors enough times to respect the weight of the place.

Spring '88, North Hollywood.

We pulled into the lot with our usual cocktail of optimism and stomach knots. The neon horse glowed above the door like a dare.

Burt, the booker, looked us over—tie-dye, weird spelling, no pedal steel in sight. He didn't ask about influences. He didn't ask about crowd size.

He just grunted:

"You boys weird or good?"

Steve grinned. "Both."

Burt nodded once. "Don't suck."

That was our contract.

At front-of-house, the Palomino soundman ran the board like someone who'd heard every band swear they were special. He gave us the look that said: *Impress me.*

We dragged in our battered gear: Herman's JC-120, Kenny's Tele, my keys perched wherever they fit, Steve's rig humming low. The Hardshells filtered in, mixing with regulars in

cowboy hats who had no idea what a Pur'p'l Tur't'l was supposed to sound like.

The set

In the second set we played a killer "Hard to Handle." The room hesitated—this wasn't straight country, and it wasn't what the regulars were expecting—but the groove wouldn't back down. By the second chorus, even the bartenders were pounding rhythms on pint glasses. Steve's voice made people look up from their drinks like they'd just been interrupted by something true.

We rolled from there into our own stuff: "Add a Little Spice," "Nowhere to Turn," "Go Ahead." Songs born in living rooms and backyards suddenly had Palomino air around them—every fill, every shout feeling like it counted twice.

And then, mid-set, we noticed him.

Back near the bar, half in shadow: black beard, dark eyes, arms folded.

Rick Rubin.

Not clapping. Not smiling.

Just watching.

There's a special adrenaline that hits when you realize the guy whose name is on records you own is standing in your room. We didn't get slick; we got focused. Count-offs tightened. Endings landed cleaner. We leaned harder into the parts that felt most like us.

When the last chord rang, we were sweating, buzzing, and weirdly calm.

Whatever that was, it was real.

The card

Later—after a set, after the blur—a bearded guy slipped Steve a small cream-colored business card and disappeared before we could do the "so what does that mean?" dance.

The name on it:

Rick Rubin.

And in Gothic type, two words that felt like a portal:

DEF AMERICAN.

Nothing concrete came of it. No meeting. No follow-up. And not long after, a different band took "Hard to Handle" to the bank.

It's easy to write this story as disappointment: the famous producer who watched, nodded, and moved on.

But that's not how it felt.

What we got that night was recognition without a costume change. We didn't turn into a slick country act or a cleaned-up Dead clone. We walked into a legendary room and played like ourselves—odd spelling, too-long jams, duct-taped gear, all of it—and the guy whose taste we respected didn't laugh us off the stage.

He didn't rescue us.

He didn't need to.

Our job wasn't to get saved.

Our job was to show up, play hard, and tell the truth with the tools we had.

And that night proved we weren't invisible.

Rubin's silence said what words couldn't:

you're not a joke,
you're not alone,
and if you keep going, you might carve out a corner of the map with your own weird little shell on it.

The second time we shared a bill with Bob Weir & Kingfish

Some nights lodge in the band's bloodstream so deeply you can still taste the room decades later—beer, sweat, cigarette ash, and that electric fog that hangs around a stage when the music has been louder than your plans.

This was one of those nights.

It was our second show with Bob Weir and Kingfish, and the vibe from the jump felt like we'd stepped into a pocket of Deadhead heaven somebody accidentally left open for local weirdos like us.

The first that year had been in San Diego at the Bacchanal—epic sound, clean and huge, the kind of system that makes you play better because you can hear the truth of every note.

But this second one?

This one was the blast—the kind that isn't just about how the set goes, but what happens after, when the band stops being a band and turns back into a bunch of humans trying to metabolize the fact that you just shared oxygen with someone who helped draw the map you've been following.

We ended up hanging—getting wasted with Bob, Matthew, the rest of Kingfish, plus crew. And the thing I still love is it didn't feel like rock stars and peasants. It felt like guys after work: talking, laughing, telling stories the way people do when the adrenaline finally drains.

I got talking with Bob and asked him about a photo I'd seen—him with his arm in a sling, shot by Brian Gold. It caught him off guard in a good way, like I'd asked about something human instead of mythology. And he answered—openly—like I was John Barlow or an old friend who'd earned the right to ask a real question.

That's what stuck: he didn't perform being Bob Weir for us.

He just was a guy. A guy who'd been through things. A guy who'd played a thousand nights and still showed up for the next one.

And then I did the most Pur'p'l Tur't'lz thing imaginable: I gave him a Pur'p'l Tur't'lz T-shirt—mine, the one I'd just worn on stage, sweaty and honest. Not a crisp merch-box souvenir. A proof-of-life rag with our crooked little flag on it.

And he dug it.

Like he was genuinely blown away.

Denise Ravitz Scher still tells one detail like it's a badge: Bob spit on her from the stage—front-row splash zone, "in a good way," she always clarifies, laughing like she's protecting the legend from misunderstanding. She swears Chuck Berez got tagged too.

It sounds ridiculous on paper, but in the moment it felt like a baptism—proof you were in it, not watching from the sidelines.

If you asked ten of us what happened that night, you'd get ten versions.

All of them true.

What I know is this: we played our hearts out, we stood in the same weather system as Bob Weir, and for a few hours the distance between fans and the source collapsed into something simple and human.

And we walked out into the night feeling like the universe had winked at our crooked little turtle name and said:

Yeah.

You're in the story too.

Tape note (Side A / Side B):
I labeled the cassette with the set split across both sides—our little proof-of-life artifact from the night—because a show this fun deserved to be saved in real time, not reconstructed later.

Field Notes & Interludes — The Palomino / Kinko's Orbit

The Palomino and Kinko's were more than locations. They were an ecosystem.
One was a legendary stage with sticky floors and a neon horse. The other was fluorescent light, paper dust, and late-night toner.

Between them, doors opened.

Not the big Hollywood doors people imagine—more like side doors. Back doors. Doors you didn't even realize were doors until you walked through and found yourself in a room you'd been chasing since high school.

These are some of the stories that happened in that orbit—part band history, part Valley mythology, part proof that the "day job" was secretly feeding the dream.

Interlude: The FM Architect — From UCLA to the "Bo" Library

While the rest of the band was chasing the perfect overdriven guitar tone, I was staring at a two-line LCD screen, drowning in the math of Frequency Modulation.

In the late '80s, the Yamaha DX7 was the king of the mountain, but it was a kingdom built on a lie. Everyone had one, but almost no one knew how to use it. To find the "real" sounds, I went to the source: UCLA, specifically a specialized DX7 programming course taught by Carl Spangler. We weren't just musicians in that room; we were digital

architects, learning the dark arts of Operators and Algorithms.

But my secret weapon wasn't just the math—it was the connection. Through my job at Kinko's, I became "friends in the trade" with the legendary Bo Tomlyn. Bo was the guru of FM synthesis, the man whose custom cartridges were the holy grail for professional keyboardists. Because of our friendship, I wasn't just playing factory presets; I was loading Bo's elite, custom patches into my library. I had sounds that even top-tier session players were hunting for.

That Kinko's "orbit" opened doors I never expected. Suddenly, I wasn't just a kid in a Valley band; I was being invited to AES and NAMM shows, walking the floor with the innovators who were literally building the future of music. [1.2, 1.3]

I would leave those high-tech showrooms in Anaheim or the sterile classrooms at UCLA and head straight back to the garage in Canoga Park. I began building the "Turtlz Patches"—a hybrid of Bo's brilliance, Spangler's theory, and my own Valley grit.

Soon, the single DX7 wasn't enough. I started building "the refrigerator"—a MIDI-controlled rack of gear that looked more like a NASA control station than a rock-and-roll rig. There was a surreal irony to it: I was using high-level synthesis theory and "insider" patches to power a jam session on the back of a flatbed truck. But when I hit that one custom lead—the one that cut through the dual guitars like a

digital laser—I knew that being the "tech geek" of the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz was the coolest job in the world.

Interlude — Calling Roger Dean

When we finished tracking *Hatched*, I decided to swing for the fences with the cover art.

I called Atlantic Records, charmed my way through a couple of switchboards, and somehow got a phone number for **Roger Dean**—yes, *that* Roger Dean. Then I used our company fax line (the only phone I could plausibly hog during work hours) to call England.

His wife answered, very polite, and said Roger was putting the children to sleep. A couple of minutes later, he came on the line himself.

I couldn't believe it.

Olympus picked up.

I pitched him fast and breathless: we're the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz, we just finished an album called *Hatched*, and—hear me out—you've never really painted turtles. Purple ones. Hatching. Could be cool.

He was kind and direct. His first question:

"Are you like Yes?"

If we were chasing that exact sound, he wasn't interested—he didn't want to repeat himself or brand a copy of the thing he

helped define. I told him the truth: we loved Yes, but we weren't Yes.

Then came budget. We didn't have one. I was hoping we could somehow raise what he needed, but Roger understood reality faster than I could dress it up. He didn't laugh. He steered.

"With your no-budget," he said, "talk to my friend Kai Krause—I'm buying him a house in Malibu. He's doing digital art in my vein. He might help."

That generosity—pointing a total nobody in a helpful direction—stuck with me.

He also invited me to an exhibit of his work. We missed the opening, but later my brother Steve and I went and soaked up the show: cathedral islands, impossible archways, other worlds rendered with a draftsman's discipline.

I hung up more inspired than disappointed.

Whether or not Roger Dean drew our cover, he'd handed me the best possible brief:

Build a world bold enough to carry itself.

So we doubled down on DIY.

Racer drew psychedelic turtle shells hatching and the lettering for the cover. I handled the typesetting and J-card layout, and we "published" *Hatched* one cassette at a time—litho, printers, scoring, the whole rickety process.

Roger Dean didn't paint our turtles, but his fingerprints are in the idea:

Build a world bold enough to carry itself.

Interlude — Meeting The Turtles (Kinko's → The Palomino)

During my six years working at Kinko's in Studio City, I had one of those very-Valley brushes with rock 'n' roll history.

One afternoon, **Mark Volman** and **Howard Kaylan**—better known as *The Turtles*—walked in and headed straight for the self-copy machines.

I couldn't resist.

I walked over and said, "I'm in a band called the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz. I hope you guys won't sue us over the name."

Howard grinned. "We couldn't sue you. The names aren't exactly the same."

Ice broken.

I worked up the nerve to invite them to a Palomino show. It was half joke, half real hope.

To my amazement, they actually showed up.

They came backstage and introduced themselves to the rest of the band like it was the most normal thing in the world.

In my youthful naïveté, it never crossed my mind to invite them onstage. I figured, they won't know our songs, and we won't know theirs.

Looking back, that was a missed opportunity the size of the entire Valley.

A Turtles / Tur't'lz jam at the Palomino would've been instant legend.

I also couldn't help asking about their time with Zappa. They said it was good, but they were trying to move away from that association—Turtles gigs paid well for very few hours of work, and that was hard to argue with.

I bragged that my Zappa cover band BARF was going to play "Call Any Vegetable" (we never did).

Howard chuckled: "Oh, that old song!"

It's still one of my favorite memories from those years.

And for the record: Howard Kaylan's *My Dinner with Jimi* remains my all-time favorite music movie.

RIP Mark Volman—so cool, so funny.

Interlude — Phil Garris, the *Blues for Allah* Button, and a Kinko's Color Pass

I met Philip Garris at Kinko's the way only an '80s Valley story starts:

too many band buttons on my jacket.

His girlfriend Lynn looked over and said, "He's wearing your button."

I asked, "Which one?"—because I had about ten pinned on.

She pointed to the *Blues for Allah* violinist.

I said, “Oh, you have one of these too?”

He smiled and said, “I’m the artist who painted that.”

I was skeptical for about two seconds, and then it got very real.

Before long, I was helping him do color copies from the original painting so he could tweak and rework designs. He came by my house, met my mom, and for a while we pal-ed around the Valley. He signed prints for me.

To this day, I think that *Blues for Allah* cover is one of the best record jackets ever made.

As Phil told it, the piece wasn’t originally painted for the Grateful Dead; they later picked it up for the album. At the time he wasn’t even a big Dead fan—he was more of a metal guy—and when he got invited to the big shows he was mostly into the scene and the party, not set lists.

He also told me he painted that piece on LSD, and that it felt effortless—like his hand was being guided by something outside himself.

Whatever the source, the result hit millions of Deadheads right in the mystic.

Kinko’s was one of those strange crossroads in my life: flyers, zines, bands, random celebrities, and in this case the man behind an image I’d stared at for years.

One minute you’re clearing a paper jam.

The next you're lining up a master painting on the glass, trying to make a shadow glow just right.

Interlude — Merl Saunders: The $50 Slot That Felt Like a Million

A couple years after that Rubin night—right around the time *Blues From the Rainforest* was making the rounds in our Dead-adjacent universe—Burt called.

We loved Merl Saunders for a simple reason:

Merl played with Jerry Garcia.

That put him in the inner circle of our musical religion.

To us, Merl wasn't just "a great keyboard player." He was proof the groove could be holy and funny, greasy and generous—all at once.

So when the phone rang and it was Burt, my brain stalled. I went almost silent—which, for me, is basically a medical event—then I managed:

"Yes. We'd love to."

Burt paused like he had to deliver the bad-news part.

"I'm sorry… we can only pay fifty bucks for the opening slot."

We didn't care.

Not even a little.

Fifty dollars wasn't payment—it was a souvenir.

We would've paid them to let us do it.

The stage was already spoken for

When we arrived, we realized this wasn't a "move some stuff around and make it work" kind of night.

Merl's rig was already set—rack gear, keyboard station, the whole command center—planted front and center.

And the Palomino stage isn't huge. It's intimate. Famous. Close enough that the room can feel your nerves.

We weren't allowed to move anything.

So we did what the Tur't'lz always did:

we made it fit anyway.

We angled amps. We negotiated inches like they were real estate. We found the one layout where nobody's gear—and nobody's destiny—got knocked over.

Meeting Merl

Backstage—or whatever counted as backstage in a room like that—we met Merl and his band.

Merl asked, casual and kind, "What time are you guys supposed to play until?"

We told him: "Until ten."

He smiled and said, basically, we could have more time because they weren't going to be ready yet.

That tiny gesture tells you everything about him.

No ego. No power trip.

Just a working musician making sure another working band gets a real moment.

Merl was warm. Funny. Present—like he actually liked being there.

And that loosened the knot in our stomachs.

The funny thing about the Palomino wasn't just the legends who passed through—it was the way the room kept handing us tests we didn't ask for.

Some nights it was a famous producer watching from the shadows.

Other nights it was a different kind of legend entirely:

one who didn't just listen—he made space.

Fifty bucks, a million dollars

We played our set like it mattered—because it did.

And the crowd didn't "support the opener" politely. They leaned in.

You could feel it: the Palomino doing that thing it does when it decides, for a few minutes, you belong.

Then Merl's band hit, and we loved them right back. Watching him play in that room after he'd treated us like humans—like peers—felt like getting blessed by the church we'd been standing outside of, pressing our faces to the stained glass.

That whole night was a win-win:

- we got the Palomino
- we got Merl
- we got treated like musicians, not "the opener"
- and we walked out knowing we'd just lived a story we'd be telling for the rest of our lives

Sometimes the biggest breaks don't come with big money.

Sometimes they come with fifty bucks, a tight stage you're not allowed to touch, and a legend who says:

"Take a little more time."

Interlude — A&M: The Day the Idea Hatched (Don Ray Phinney)

Through Steve—and through Ethel, who seemed to have a sixth sense for putting the right people in the room—we met a musician named Don Ray Phinney.

Don walked in talking big. Not fake big, exactly—more like the kind of big that's half résumé and half smoke machine.

He said he already had a record. Said he was "the real deal."

And he had a proposition:

He wanted the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz to record a few of his songs as his backing band.

It wasn't our kind of music. Not even close.

But in those days, a gig was a gig—and we were still learning the difference between jam and job.

So we made a counter-offer like a band that had been burned before:

“If we’re going to do this, you pay us to rehearse first. Then you pay us to record.”

Don agreed.

Rehearsals: promises, fantasy, and the missing perks

We learned the tunes. They didn’t feel like us—less wild-card, more straight line—but we did what we always did: we worked the parts until they were tight.

During rehearsals, Don painted the picture of how this was going to go: wine and dine, cocaine and women, the full cartoon of “big time.”

None of that showed up.

What showed up on recording day was a hired guard.

A guard.

To protect our “secret” recording at A&M.

A&M: the first real studio any of us ever saw

Walking into A&M felt like stepping onto another planet.

Up to that point, “recording” for us meant whatever we could patch together—two-track live tapes, a four-track Tascam cassette, levels that weren’t always sane.

We were used to controlling chaos because the chaos was ours.

A&M was the opposite: controlled, expensive, quiet in a way that made you hear your own heartbeat.

I'd asked ahead of time for a piano and an organ—something reasonable.

What appeared was a twelve-foot Steinway grand.

Breathtaking.

Also intimidating as hell.

I'd come up on synth action—DX7s, cheap keys, whatever survived the night. The Steinway's touch was gorgeous… and heavy. It felt like a thoroughbred horse that could sense fear.

And the clock was running. Money was burning. People were watching.

Tracking: one or two takes, like professionals (mostly)

We cut the basic track as a whole band.

To our credit, we were prepared. We played through the songs professionally and got what they needed in a take or two.

Todd's drumming didn't go unnoticed in the control room. At one point I overheard a comment that still makes me laugh because it was so studio-people:

"I didn't know he was going to do a snare roll!"

Welcome to the big leagues, where a snare roll is a committee decision.

Then the room changed.

The Steinway moment

They cleared the studio, moved the Steinway into the center of the room, and mic'd it up with microphones that looked like museum pieces—gear that cost more than our entire rehearsal life.

Now it was just… me.

All eyes. Red light. The sense that every second was expensive.

I took a breath, found the part, and played it—again in one or two takes—and when it was done, relief hit like gravity returning.

I hadn't embarrassed myself.

I hadn't wasted their time.

I survived the Steinway.

Hammond + Leslie: cockpit music

Then they rolled in a Hammond organ with a Leslie.

If you've never sat down at a real Hammond in a real room: it looks like an aircraft cockpit designed by a mad scientist—drawbars, knobs, pedals, switches.

They asked if I was ready.

I found the Leslie speed switch—the one thing I knew I'd need—and we were off.

Again: one or two takes.

Again: whew.

Don's vocals: the only one who wasn't ready

Then Don did his vocal overdubs.

And the reality didn't match the talk.

In rehearsal he carried himself like a headliner.

In the studio he sounded like the least prepared person in the building.

Maybe he was nervous. Maybe he'd already had the party he kept promising us. Maybe headphones are the great equalizer.

Whatever it was, we backed him as well as we could.

We did our job.

And to his credit, he paid us.

The money: not fortune—fuel

Between rehearsal pay and the A&M day, it came to a little over three grand—the kind of money that doesn't change your life but does change your thinking.

Not quit-your-job money.

Band money.

The kind that makes you look at your own songs and think:

Wait.

What if we did this for us?

We didn't walk out with a deal. We didn't get the perks Don predicted.

What we got was better:

A glimpse of how the machine works—and proof we could walk into a room like that and not get crushed.

And somewhere inside that intimidation, inside that Steinway weight, inside that Hammond cockpit…

an idea started forming.

The second session: fixing the intro, breaking the spell

After A&M, Don hired me alone to go to another Valley studio and re-record the piano intro. Smaller room. Simpler setup. Just me trying to match the spirit of that big-night take without the big-night electricity. He paid me around $300, which felt fair.

Then came the twist: Don went back in and re-cut his vocal again… and somehow it landed worse than what he'd done at A&M.

And that newer vocal became the final release.

That's when the spell broke for me—in a useful way. Because it proved something I didn't fully understand yet:

A great studio doesn't guarantee a great record.
Preparation does.
Taste does.
Judgment does.
Sometimes the smartest move is to stop touching the thing that's already alive.

Still, I don't regret any of it.

The A&M day gave us the mountaintop.

The Valley overdub day gave us the lesson.

And the money made the band look at each other and think:

What if we put that energy into our songs?

Because if we could survive A&M… we could make something of our own.

From the archive (Steve Bryant):
"This was a great thing that fell in our lap… we got paid to rehearse, and then record at A&M… we made over three grand so we started saving to record our own."

Track / archive note:
"You'll Be Alright (A&M Mix)" — Don Ray Phinney backed by Pur'p'l Tur't'lz
Personnel: Steve Bryant (bass) · Ken Bellew (guitar) · Greg Herman (guitar) · Todd Myers (drums) · Greg Brown (Steinway piano, Hammond organ)

We didn't leave A&M with a deal.

We left with proof.

And once you've seen what a "real" session looks like, you can't unsee it.

On the drive home, the talk quietly shifted from Don's songs to our songs.

The idea of *Hatched* wasn't a dream anymore.

It was a plan.

Chapter 13: Southbound Miles & Magnetic Trails

The first time we pointed the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz van south, Los Angeles shimmered in the rearview—heat waves rising off the freeway, the Valley melting into asphalt hum.

We weren't chasing a record deal.

We were chasing horizons. New rooms. New weather. And the hope that our weird little shell could travel.

Ripples in the map

By '88 our name started popping up in strange places—little proof that the driveway wasn't the whole world.

We traded gigs with a band called Half Way Home. Years later, their Wikipedia entry would casually mention us as an example of the Dead-style cover bands that were popular in L.A.

Just one line. One small sentence.

But it meant the ripples had left the cul-de-sac.

The van sagged on worn shocks. Money was always tight. Meals were a roulette of tacos, fries, and whatever someone's mom packed "just in case."

Southbound miles weren't glamorous.

They were gas receipts, split tips, sore backs, and car stereos blasting our own hissy tapes like we were trying to hypnotize ourselves into believing the whole thing was real.

But every mile confirmed the same truth:

our little Valley tribe could spill into other cities and still make sense.

Ventura Theater: our favorite room in the world

At some point we found a place that felt like the best version of what we'd been trying to build: the Ventura Theater.

It's hard to describe the feeling without getting sentimental, so I'll put it bluntly:

it made us play better just by standing on the stage.

It felt like home—not the "we grew up here" kind, but the "this room understands what we're doing" kind. Real sound system. Real lights. Real nights with a beginning, a middle, and a sweaty end.

We opened for legitimately cool acts—Hot Tuna, David Lindley—names that made us go quiet and double-check we'd heard the booker right.

And at least one night we got to headline a Dead Head Night, which for us felt like getting handed the keys to the church we'd been sneaking into since high school.

A small tour that proved a big point

The Ventura stretch pushed us into a tiny run that, on paper, looked like the start of "touring":

- Ventura Theater
- Borsodi's in Santa Barbara
- a small club in San Luis Obispo

And honestly? We did really well.

Good crowds. Good energy. The band sounding like itself.

But we also learned something important: we loved the *idea* of the road more than the grind underneath it. "Adventure" turns into "Where are we sleeping?" by 2 a.m., and not everybody loves that transformation.

Still—those miles mattered.

Because they proved we weren't only a rumor band.

We could land.

Isla Vista: the alley gig nobody ordered (but everyone attended)

Santa Barbara gave us one of the strangest shows of our lives—Isla Vista, really.

We were invited to play for college students, and when we arrived nobody seemed to claim responsibility for hiring us… and yet the party was clearly happening.

They ran a power cord out of a house window like they were feeding electricity to a raccoon, and set us up in an alleyway.

Not a stage.

Not a yard.

An alley.

Which sounds terrible until you remember: we were the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz.

If it had power, we could make it a venue.

People appeared from nowhere, like somebody rang a bell for the whole neighborhood. We played, we laughed, we leaned into the absurdity.

Later we slept in random houses—welcoming strangers with spare floors and spare couches. I ended up in a little kid's bed, trying not to break anything, wondering how this counted as a gig while also knowing:

this is exactly the kind of gig you tell stories about forever.

People's Park: daylight magic

Somewhere in that same era we played People's Park one afternoon to a great reception.

Daylight instead of midnight. Faces instead of silhouettes.

It reminded me that not every show needed chaos to feel alive.

Sometimes the magic was just:

we showed up, we played, and people actually listened.

KXLU: two hours live with Johnny V

Around this time we also did something that felt completely different from our usual ecosystem of noise and crowd reaction:

we performed live on the radio at KXLU, hosted by Johnny V—a connection that came through my Kinko's world.

"Live in studio" sounds glamorous until you realize what it actually meant:

we were spread out in different rooms—some of us in hallways—positioned wherever a microphone could fit. We could barely see each other.

It was like trying to be a band while playing hide-and-seek.

And there was no crowd. No Hardshell roar. No "Wooo!" coming back at us.

Just headphones, red lights, and the weird awareness that your mistakes don't evaporate into the room.

They go straight into the broadcast.

Which, of course, made it hilarious.

We leaned into it. Treated it like an experiment—the same way we treated the early jams—except now the experiment was happening on the air for two hours.

It was awkward. Unique. Absolutely worth doing.

And it belongs here because it proves something important:

by then, we weren't only surviving in garages.

We were doing real band things—our version of real—without losing the crooked grin that made us us.

Chapter 14: The Fans — Hardshells

Every band says it has fans.

We had something closer to a tribe.

They called themselves the Hardshells, and without them the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz would've been just another Valley band that burned hot and vanished.

Born in living rooms

It started small: friends of friends crowding into Ethel's den, passing pipes and burritos while we rattled the walls.

Then it grew its own infrastructure:

flyer-runners, couch providers, bootleggers, grill operators, impromptu security, amateur therapists.

They weren't just listening.

They were building it with us.

The Sunday ritual

Sundays became sacred.

We'd grill, play half a set, then collapse on couches for *The Simpsons*. Miss one Sunday and you'd spend the week hearing replayed punchlines about dropped drumsticks, half-burnt burgers, and someone's spectacularly bad trip.

These weren't rehearsals.

They were family dinners with feedback as the soundtrack.

Winston's and the Ocean Beach crew

By the time we rolled into Ocean Beach, San Diego, the shell had stretched south.

Winston's was a funky, wood-paneled club a block from the water. The first night we played there, it felt like home immediately—Deadhead vibe, bare feet, cold beer, that easy OB mix of drifters and lifers.

After one set, the manager pulled us aside and asked, "What do you guys make on Monday mornings?"

We mumbled something about day jobs.

He smirked.

"I'll pay you more to play Sunday nights."

Suddenly we were Winston's Sunday house band.

Two hotel rooms. A rented cargo truck. Gas money.

And the sweetest benefit of all: we could call bosses on Monday and quit, using the rarest sentence in the Valley:

My band pays more than you do.

Those Sunday drives became rituals—a rolling frat house in a cargo truck, gear stacked to the ceiling, jokes and smoke bouncing off metal walls.

Meeting Dawn

It was at Winston's that I first saw Dawn.

She was on the dance floor with a date but kept looking my way between spins. At one point she leaned in and said:

“I’m with this guy now… but I won’t be later.”

I just nodded—cool.

An hour later she and the guy were arguing. By the end of the set she’d ditched him and followed us back to the hotel.

The band razzed me mercilessly while we found a quiet spot and started kissing, but I didn’t care.

When we finally exchanged numbers, it felt like more than a road fling.

At the next gig I stayed at her place before and after the show. Over New Year’s we spent a week together, even visiting her birth mom and mom’s boyfriend in Marin. They welcomed us like family—holiday snacks, Dead tickets on December 30th, long soaks in their hot tub.

Later Dawn asked me to take her cockatiel, Ishtar, back to L.A. until she could pick him up.

That bird became another saga.

But Dawn quickly became woven into mine.

Before long, I asked her to move in with me.

That decision pulled me out of my parents’ house—and eventually north, to Santa Cruz, and later to Jenny.

Music gave me Dawn.

And Dawn quietly re-routed my life.

Family, not fame

That’s Hardshell magic in a nutshell.

Fans weren’t just bodies in a crowd.

They became friends, lovers, allies, chosen family.

They carried amps, ran cables, defended gigs when punks tried to crash them, and offered floors and couches when we were broke.

We didn’t “make it” by industry standards.

But through the Hardshells—and through people like Dawn—the band became more than a sound.

It became a network of lives braided together.

The shell was never hollow.

It was full of people.

Chapter 15: Studio Days — Hatched and the Tape Machine

By 1989, we'd filled enough garages, basements, and backyards with sound to know what we wanted.

The live cassettes were great, but they were blurry snapshots.

We wanted a portrait.

We wanted a record.

Robbie's place

The miracle arrived as Robbie Weaver's home studio in Woodland Hills.

"Home" is misleading—this was a first-class room tucked into suburbia. Lava lamps in the corners. Cables neatly coiled. Racks of gear that looked like they'd fallen off a truck from Capitol.

At the center sat the Tascam 38 reel-to-reel—our ticket from rumor to artifact.

Engineer John Cevatello ran the board. Where we were chaos, he was calm.

With John at the controls and Robbie's studio wrapping us in colored light, it felt like stepping through a portal.

For once, the rooms we'd rehearsed in didn't define us.

This was the real deal.

The sessions

We walked in with a stack of originals that had survived the gauntlet of backyards and Sunday porch tests.

Songs like:

- "Peace of Mind" — Kenny's anthem, finally blooming with real reverb
- "Havin' Fun" — our philosophy squeezed into a sing-along
- "Far Away" — Herman's dream chords drifting through Leslie shimmer
- "Little Time Left" — Steve's urgent, bass-driven plea
- "Add a Little Spice to Life" — burrito-wrapper inspiration turned crowd chant
- "In-Between Nowhere" — fragile, raw, caught in a single take
- "Foolin' Yourself" — Kenny bittersweet, sharpened
- "Running for the Moon" — a closer that felt like it could spin forever

Todd Myers drove the sessions from behind the kit.

Where Chris gave us the earliest thunder, Todd brought a heavier, more focused fire. Crisp fills. Tight kick. Relentless forward motion.

After one particularly fierce pass, Kenny leaned back and said:

"That's the fire we've been waiting for."

Herman's JC-120 hummed under isolation blankets. Steve's bass rig shook the floor. My Yamaha keys perched on whatever stand we could spare but finally cut through the mix.

For two solid days we lived in that room—overdubbing sparingly, arguing over takes, laughing when somebody botched a lyric.

The best magic stayed close to how we played live.

"In-Between Nowhere" arrived whole in one pass.

John just said, "Don't touch it."

"Spice" exploded with that signature "Wooo!" audiences loved.

When we played it back through Robbie's monitors, we finally heard what we'd been chasing:

not just noise,

songs.

Neon shells

Visually, Racer did most of the heavy lifting on *Hatched*—and I don't mean "she made something cool."

Tracy was a main artist for us in the real, tangible sense: logo maker, cover artist, and a craftsperson who understood production as part of the art.

I handled typesetting and J-card layout, then ping-ponged around the Valley and L.A.: cards scored, cassette mastering,

printers, approvals, the tiny details nobody sees until they're wrong.

And Tracy, being Tracy, didn't stop at the cassette.

She screened one-off shirts and sweatshirts over the years—actual Pur'p'l Tur't'lz swag with the beauty you only get from someone who cares about ink the way musicians care about tone.

$27.43

A few weeks later, a royalty check arrived:

$27.43.

Steve framed it like a trophy and wrote one word under the glass:

VALIDATION.

It wasn't the money.

It was proof that *Hatched* wasn't just ours anymore.

It was out in the world, hissing through tape decks and Walkmans, alive in bedrooms and cars we'd never see.

The songs weren't perfect. Tempos rushed. Vocals cracked. Mixes leaned raw.

But that was the point.

For the first time, the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz had an album.

Something real.

Something no one could take away.

Field Note — Racer's Garage Press & the Dynacord Disaster

We even played at Tracy's house one afternoon once—Ron Russell era.

We loved Racer, so of course we were glad to do it. It felt like the tribe playing in the tribe's living room, the way it was always supposed to be.

I brought a fairly new Leslie simulator made by Dynacord—a pricey rackmount unit I'd convinced myself was a serious step up.

It had indented trim pots on the back—one of those designs that quietly assumes nobody will touch it without a plan.

While we were playing, I asked the keyboard player from Calvin's band, Urban Dread, if he'd help me dial it in—just tweak it until it sounded best in the room.

He grabbed a screwdriver, reached around, and snapped the potentiometer.

That tiny click—that soft, dumb mechanical failure sound—was the whole afternoon turning into a bill.

The simulator was broken. Done.

I eventually found someone who could repair it, and while it was on the operating table I asked for a modification: mono in / stereo out wasn't enough. I wanted stereo ins and outs.

They built another circuit, did the mod, and the bill got heavy—one of those pay-it-like-a-ransom situations.

I paid it, because of course I did.

When you're chasing a sound, you convince yourself it's always worth it.

That era also marked something else:

Steve and I kept adding equipment as the band grew. At one point we both had refrigerator-sized road cases—his for bass, mine for keyboards.

They helped our sound get bigger and better.

They were also brutally heavy and caused endless hassle.

Our ambition had weight.

Sometimes literally.

Chapter 16: Outtakes, Epics, and Improv (1989–1991)

If *Hatched* was our portrait, what came after were the sketches in the margins—raw, restless, sprawling.

Once the neon-shelled cassettes were dubbed and sold, the reels kept spinning.

So did our curiosity.

Between 1990 and ’91, Robbie Weaver’s room became less “studio” and more laboratory.

Afterburners

Steve called these late-night runs our afterburners—the extra miles we squeezed out after the “album songs” were tracked.

Fueled by cold coffee and stubbornness, we’d pile into Robbie’s space on weeknights and chase whatever spark showed up.

Sometimes it was Herman refusing to let a riff die.

Sometimes Kenny walked in with a half-finished melody on a cassette.

Sometimes I held a droning chord on keys until everyone else figured out where it wanted to go.

On the early runs, Todd kept the ship upright—quick hands, big ears.

As the calendar rolled forward, Ron Russell began sitting in, bringing a heavier pocket and calmer patience.

Different drummers. Same mission:

stretch, listen, surprise each other.

Tape tricks and tangents

John showed us how to flip reels and ride varispeed.

Suddenly Herman's solos coughed up hidden counter-melodies.

We re-amped guitars in Robbie's tiled bathroom for natural slap, dragged a speaker into the laundry room for weird reflections, and abused a half-busted digital delay for ping-pong echoes.

If a take had a soul but limped, John would say:

"Don't fix it—frame it."

Some nights we lived by the click.

Most nights we murdered it.

The best takes breathed—tiny rushes around the downbeat, the human wobble that makes a chorus lean forward.

Live-to-two-track nights

Every few weeks we'd kill the safety net:

no overdubs, stereo pair, red light on.

Those nights taught us the value of leaving fingerprints on tape.

Not perfect.

Alive.

None of these outtakes made us famous.

They did something better.

They made us fearless.

The afterburner sessions taught us to trust the room, the tape, and each other—to chase a riff past embarrassment and into discovery.

Hatched was the record.

The afterburners were the fire that kept us warm when the phone didn't ring.

Interlude — The Haire Pharmerz: Two Mics, One Strap, and Rock Bottom (1989–1990)

Somewhere along the line, Steve and I got it in our heads that we should be our own band—just the two of us—outside the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz orbit.

It sounds obvious now.

It wasn't what we did.

We were used to the whole circus: people, amps, drums, volume wars, the safety net of a full band.

But Steve and I hung out constantly. We played and sang together all the time—the way you do when you're young and music is basically the air in the room.

Sam and Gwen were always around too. Always. They'd show up and suddenly the house would turn into harmonies—songs floating through kitchen and hallway like that's just what homes did.

So this duo idea wasn't a business plan.

It was something we were already doing every night.

One day we just said: let's put a name on it and book gigs.

Steve called it **The Haire Pharmerz**—a name that felt like a band you'd see on a flyer stapled to a phone pole at 2 a.m.

It made us laugh.

Which meant it was perfect.

Then the universe did what the universe does when you think you have time:

it sped everything up.

Steve called me while I was on vacation and said we were opening for Timothy Leary—yes, that Timothy Leary—in less than a month.

Opening for Timothy Leary?

As a duo?

With no set?

With zero rehearsals?

I had one immediate realization:

I need a guitar *right now*.

So I bought one in an antique store. Forty bucks. Nylon-string. Already haunted.

When I got back to the Valley, I heard Frank Zappa was doing a signing at Crown Books. I got in line like everybody else, bought his book, and brought my beat-up new guitar with me because… well, because I'm me.

Zappa looks at it and deadpans:

"What do you want me to write on it?"

I said, "How about 'My Guitar Wants To Kill Yo Mama.'"

He pauses. "That's a lot to write."

Then he writes the whole thing across the cheap guitar in Sharpie and signs it FZ like it's nothing.

Later, in the parking lot, a limo pulls up and the driver rolls down the window:

"Does it play better now?"

I said, "Definitely."

They told me to spray it so the Sharpie wouldn't rub off.

Which is the kind of practical advice you only get from strangers orbiting a Zappa signing in a limo.

The night we bombed

Our debut gig was at The Breakaway—Santa Monica, maybe. Honestly it's all a blur of headlights and posters and nerves.

To calm down I had a few tokes and some drinks.

I was still sick. My voice was compromised. My confidence was free and unearned.

We walked onstage full of rock fantasies.

And then we bombed.

Not a gentle “not our best” bomb.

A full-body, long-term memory bomb.

Early in the first song, my guitar came unfastened from the strap and fell to the floor.

That sound—wood and embarrassment—still lives in my nervous system.

Then the pickup fell off because it was held on with putty and optimism, and my roughness wasn’t compatible with either.

Our voices didn’t lock. The harmonies didn’t land. Nothing landed.

It was like watching your own crash in slow motion from inside the car.

That night became my personal rock bottom.

Not in a quit-music-forever way.

In a reset-your-standards way.

I made a vow:

I will never play without being properly ready again.

Afterward I told Steve I’d never do that again.

He, in his Steve way, says—casually, as if he's ordering a burrito:

"We've got another gig."

So we practiced.

Then practiced more.

We learned how to be a duo. How to pace a set. How to recover when something goes sideways. How to be funny without hiding behind it.

After about nine months, we could entertain people without totally sucking.

Then we could entertain them and actually be good.

The Haire Pharmerz didn't start because we were ready.

It started because we weren't.

And then we became ready.

Interlude — Emmett Chapman, Laurel Canyon, and the Driveway Next Door

The first time I ever saw a Chapman Stick up close wasn't on a record sleeve.

It was at the US Festival.

Steve Wozniak had a technology tent full of futuristic gear, and one station was the Chapman Stick.

I'd already seen one in the wild—Tony Levin with King Crimson—so I knew what it could do.

But this was the first time I could really feel it as a physical instrument: the width of the fretboard, the logic of it, the way it invited both hands to become a whole rhythm section.

There was a line.

When it was your turn, you put on headphones, held the Stick, and tried it yourself.

And Emmett Chapman was right there.

Not a distant inventor name.

Present. Patient. Grounded.

The kind of guy who didn't just build an instrument.

He built a world.

I wanted one immediately.

Of course I did.

Emmett had a flyer that said if you were serious, you could visit his studio and try different instruments out.

So I drove up Laurel Canyon Boulevard, and he welcomed me in and gave me space to explore—kind, unpretentious, no sales pressure.

The truth was: I didn't know what I was doing yet, and I definitely didn't have that kind of money.

I thanked him and left with my brain on fire.

Eventually I found a Stick through Walter Woods for $400—an unbelievable deal.

Around then Steve started getting a little jealous of the whole Emmett thing—not mean jealous, just best-friend jealous.

So we made a plan to see Emmett together.

We drove to a show in Malibu… and Steve forgot his driver's license.

The club wouldn't let him in.

No exceptions.

So Steve sat outside near the ocean listening to the waves, bummed out, missing Emmett play—again.

We left after the first set so he wouldn't have to sit out there alone all night.

And then the universe cracked a grin:

Emmett moved to the Valley.

Not just near us.

Right next to Steve's house.

Same driveway.

From that point on, Emmett and his wife Yuta became part of our world. We became real friends—the kind who end up spending Christmas Eve together.

Over the years Emmett even joined our band from time to time—this legendary musician showing up like it was normal.

After Steve passed, Emmett came to me and asked gently if he could play at Steve's memorial.

Of course he could.

Emmett did the opening set, then sat in with the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz for the whole thing.

Before we went on, he said:

"I'll just follow along. I'll try not to get in the way."

I told him:

"Play whatever you feel. Go for it."

I wasn't going to let anybody play bass that night—Steve was the one we were memorializing.

But Emmett didn't replace anything.

He fit.

Like a voice joining a choir, not taking a solo someone else earned.

Sometimes life hands you impossible threads:

you see an instrument in a tech tent, meet the inventor, chase the instrument, and then the inventor ends up sharing a driveway with your best friend.

And when your best friend is gone, that same inventor shows up with humility and music—right when it matters most.

Aftermath & Continuations

The Joint Chiefs — I Came Back

Then I went to a party.

There were a lot of our friends and fans there—the whole ecosystem, the same faces that had stood in backyards and clubs and parking lots.

And somewhere inside the house, in a bedroom, a band was playing.

The Joint Chiefs.

They sounded great.

I recognized the drummer, Andy Vandenbosch, and we started talking.

I told him about "retirement"—about quitting music, about Indian food, about being done.

I suggested maybe I could guest onstage for a song or two.

They invited me to their rehearsal spot—their "barricade," named after their song and their space.

And as soon as we started playing, I knew the truth:

I wasn't retired.

I was just on pause.

I wanted to be in that band.

I was back.

For the next year and a half I played great shows with the Joint Chiefs, including old haunts like Mancini's, where people were happy to have an ex–Pur'p'l Tur't'l bringing a crowd again—not because of nostalgia, but because the music was still alive.

Then in 1994, Dawn and I moved to Santa Cruz, and I had to say goodbye—not just to the Joint Chiefs, but to the whole Valley universe of friends, bands, hangouts, and familiar rooms.

After that, whenever I came back down, it was all reunions—return trips, catch-up gigs, stories told in parking lots like no time had passed.

Santa Cruz became a new musical life.

Different scene. Different coastline. Different cast.

Same hunger to play.

Eventually I joined a band called The Hired Guns, and in a way it felt like my two worlds were finally shaking hands.

It all came together on one of those nights that feels impossible even while you're living it:

my 30th birthday in Santa Cruz at the Vets Hall—a full-circle gig where the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz played, The Hired Guns played, Edicius played, and BARF played too.

One stage.

Multiple chapters of my life.

All in the same room.

Like the universe throwing me a party and saying:

See?

You didn't quit.

You just kept changing forms.

The Zappa Detour: BA**R**F***

Toward the very end of the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz, I started another band.

A Frank Zappa cover band.

I loved Frank's music, even though at the time I only knew how to play a couple of his simpler songs. But Zappa had this magnetism—humor and danger and discipline all braided together—and I wanted to go there. I recruited friends. We took it seriously enough to rehearse hard, and not seriously enough to understand what we were getting ourselves into.

I was also afraid of being sued.

If you grew up with Zappa records, you know what I mean: those warnings on the albums read like legal documents. Frank felt like the kind of guy who might show up in court because you played the wrong chord.

So I did the only thing that made sense in my brain:

I called his hotline.

818-PUMPKIN.

A real person answered. I asked if we had a Zappa cover band, would we get sued?

They said: No—We'd be honored.

That single sentence freed the whole thing.

We became:

B*A*R*F* (Frank Zappa covers)
Keys: Greg Brown
Bass: Stephen Bryant
Drums: Tony Giraldo
Guitar: Bruce Kagan
Guitar & Lap Steel: Bruce Grossman
Vocals: Rick Bray
Percussion: Mike Dwyer
Everyone sings.

We weren't a "greatest hits" Zappa band so much as a deep-cut dare. We did "Cosmik Debris," "The Torture Never Stops," "Willie the Pimp," "My Guitar Wants to Kill Yo Mama," "Goblin Girl," "Son of Mr. Green Genes," "Trouble Every Day," and "Dumb All Over." We loved stitching things together too—"Black Napkins" sliding into "Carolina Hard-Core Ecstasy," or "Camarillo Brillo" running straight into "Muffin Man." Ridiculous music, righteous music.

We did it for about nine months, and then it broke up—mutually. No big war, just the natural end of a strange, intense little run.

But it marked something important: a separation from the Tur't'lz without anyone saying it out loud.

Because by then, even though we were still writing and woodshedding new tunes, we weren't being serious about rehearsing anymore. Drugs had taken over. My friends had become fiends.

And I hit my limit.

I told the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz I was quitting music—both bands—and retiring in general. I told myself and other people that I was going to learn to cook vegetarian Indian food.

And I did.

That lasted about nine months.

Outtakes, Epics, and Improv (1990–1991)

If Hatched was our debut portrait, what came after were the sketches in the margins—raw, restless, sprawling. Once the neon-shelled cassettes were dubbed and sold, the Tascam reels kept spinning. So did our curiosity.

Between 1990 and ’91, Robbie Weaver’s first-class room became less “studio” and more laboratory.

Afterburners

Steve called these late-night runs our afterburners—the extra miles we squeezed out after the “album songs” were tracked. Fueled by cold coffee and stubbornness, we’d pile into Robbie’s space on weeknights and chase whatever spark showed up.

Sometimes it was Herman refusing to let a riff die. Sometimes Kenny walked in with a half-finished melody on a cassette. Sometimes I held a droning chord on keys until everyone else figured out where it wanted to go.

On the early runs, Todd kept the ship upright—quick hands, big ears. As the calendar rolled forward, Ron Russell began sitting in, bringing a heavier pocket and a calmer patience. Different drummers, same mission: stretch, listen, surprise each other.

Tape tricks and tangents

John showed us how to flip reels and ride varispeed. Suddenly Herman’s solos coughed up hidden counter-melodies. We re-amped guitars in Robbie’s tiled bathroom

for natural slap, dragged a speaker into the laundry room for weird reflections, and abused a half-busted digital delay for ping-pong echoes.

If a take had a soul but limped, John would murmur, “Don’t fix it—frame it.”

Some nights we lived by the click; most nights we murdered it. The best takes breathed—tiny rushes around the downbeat, the kind of human wobble that makes a chorus lean forward.

Live-to-two-track nights

Every few weeks we’d kill the safety net: no overdubs, stereo pair, red light on.

“Rolling (Ending)” earned its name that way—a groove that refused to stop, collapsing and rebuilding until it found a second wind. Earlier, “In-Between Nowhere” had taught us the value of leaving fingerprints on tape; these nights turned that lesson into doctrine.

We didn’t know it then, but those boxes were a map we’d follow later—to KXLU, Winston’s OB, Mancini’s—proof that the studio and the stage were feeding each other.

Why it mattered

None of these outtakes made us famous. They did something better.

They made us fearless.

The afterburner sessions taught us to trust the room, the tape, and each other—to chase a riff past embarrassment and into discovery. Hatched was the record. The afterburners were the fire that kept us warm when the phone didn't ring.

KXLU — Live In-Studio with Johnny V (12-20-90)

By late 1990, we'd played plenty of rooms where the "soundcheck" was basically someone yelling, "Is this on?" and the crowd reaction ranged from ecstatic to please stop leaning on my car. So when we got invited to do a live in-studio radio performance on KXLU, it felt like a different kind of milestone—less beer-soaked, more official, and somehow even more nerve-wracking.

The invite came through Johnny V, a friend and host connected through my Kinko's world—one of those Kinko's miracles where your day job quietly turns into a ladder. Johnny was the real deal: warm, supportive, and genuinely excited to have us on for two full hours live on the air.

Here's the twist: it wasn't like playing a club. It was like playing inside a maze.

KXLU had us set up in the studio in a way none of us were used to. We weren't all in one room facing each other like a band. We were spread out—different rooms, even hallways—so half the time you couldn't really see who was cueing what. You had to listen harder and trust that somewhere, behind a door, your bandmate was still in the same song.

And the other weird thing?

No crowd.

No cheers. No laughter. No “Wooo!” bouncing back at us. No faces telling you whether you’re killing it or accidentally inventing a new genre called Confidently Lost.

At first, it felt like playing into a vacuum—just red lights, headphones, and that quiet radio-station intensity where you suddenly become aware of every breath you take. But once we got a few minutes in, it turned fun—unique, even surreal. We weren’t feeding off an audience the way we usually did; we were feeding off each other, through walls, like a band performing telepathically.

And somehow… it worked.

Two hours on the air. A real broadcast. A real host. A real moment where the Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz existed outside our usual ecosystem of flyers, house parties, and “trust us, this is happening.”

Archive note: Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz — 12-20-90 — KXLU Live Radio Broadcast (Side A / Side B)

Part IV — Legacy

Epilogue: Looking Back, Moving Forward

I started as the left-handed guitar player, then came a Yamaha with mini-keys and a brother who demanded two hands.

Years later, sitting beside his laptop while he digitized the tapes he'd insisted we make, I watched him do what he always did: turn a night into a memory you could hold.

Kenny's voice — chaos outside, care inside. He added the spice.
Ron's echo — "It's a long time ago, but it could have been a minute ago."
Herman's thread — the riff that refuses to quit until it becomes a song.

Bands end. The brotherhood doesn't. What lasts is the shell — the people who wear it, repair it, pass it on.

Coda: The Groove Endures

When the final lights dim and the last bass line fades, we raise our glasses — to Steve and Kenny — heads nodding in perfect 4/4.

Their groove endures because we keep playing, keep laughing, keep letting the night surprise us. The wheel keeps turning.

The shell holds.

Facebook Easter Egg — 2017

Back in 2017, Steve asked our Facebook family: "What should the name of the book be?" The comments turned into a comedy writers' room. Highlights:

- Turtle Chaps
- Coming Out of My Shell
- A Clockwork Tur't'l
- They Made It Up As They Went Along
- The Long and Binding Road
- Waiting for Uncle Stinky
- The Shells of Grateful Men
- Turtle Poop
- Headz and Turtle Tailz

And the eventual winner, suggested by Neil Liebert:

- Hard To Handle

That thread is the Hardshells in miniature — irreverent, loyal, endlessly creative.

Era Map (Steve's Frame)

- Pre–Pur'p'l Tur't'lz (1982–mid '84)
  Proto-bands, living-room jams, Haire Pharmerz, "mystery tapes."

- Vol. 1 — Chris Baustert era (1983–1985)
  "So-so band, best parties." Generators, parks, house shows; Hughes Jr. High (9-16-84); early clubs.
- Vol. 2 — Todd Myers era (1986–1989)
  "Hold on tight." Writing sprints, Country Club (Reseda) runs, Isla Vista, John Anson Ford Theatre.
- Vol. 3 — Ron Russell era (1990–1993)
  "Wow, we know what we're doing." Mancini's, Winston's OB residency, KXLU, Palomino swan songs.
- Reunions & Coda (1994–2015)
  1997 reunions, memorials, never-ending projects.

Anchor Timeline & Recordings (Highlights)

- Pre-PT / Proto ('82–mid '84)
  Living-room & garage jams; "mystery tapes"; Rhodes + Roland mono-synth era; Haire Pharmerz experiments; "Home" (Steve).
- Vol. 1 — Chris ('83–'85)
  9-16-84 Hughes Junior High; Shadow Ranch Park; Dennis Adkins generator era; SIR Studios (1-24-85, date contested); Chatsworth Park generator show; Ventura County Fairgrounds; La Cabaret Halloween '85; A&M Studios jingle session; Palomino 5-15-88 (rare early song rendition) later referenced.
- Vol. 2 — Todd ('86–'89)
  Country Club (Reseda) Labor Day fests; opening for

Go Ahead; John Anson Ford Theatre 4-30-88; Isla Vista/People's Park; Trancas w/ Billy Preston; *Hatched* sessions; originals surge.

- Vol. 3 — Ron ('90–'93)
  Palomino c. '90; Rehearsal 2-6-90; KXLU Live at the Head Shop; Winston's OB residency (from 3-3-91); Mancini's 3-16-91; Top of Topanga A-frame; Santa Cruz Vets Hall.

- Reunions & Coda
  1994–1997 reunion runs; "all seven Turtlz" tape; Steve memorial with Emmett Chapman.

Originals Index (Selected)

Two Magic Hands · Add a Little Spice to Life · Here We Are · P.C.H. (Please Come Home) · Little Time Left · Mystical Moon (lyrics: Vince Novo) · Freedom (Let the Children Live) · Passion, Greed, and Fear · Chance · Rolling (Ending) · Knights Dragon · Spot for Ya Baby · Nowhere to Turn · Get Up · You Know They Do · Home

Notable Covers (Recurring)

Grateful Dead core · Dylan · Talking Heads · Little Feat · "Feelin' Alright" · assorted '60s chestnuts

Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Discography

(Last updated: December 2025)

Streaming archive (full Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Archive): https://soundcloud.com/greg-brown-37/sets/purpl-turtlz-archive-a-k-a-the

1 · Official Studio Releases

1989 — *Hatched*
Tracked at Robbie Weaver Studios (Woodland Hills) on multitrack; engineered & mixed by John Cevatello.
Art: Racer (primary).
J-card typesetting & layout: Greg Brown.
Production: Greg Brown (litho coordination, J-card scoring, cassette mastering, printer/vendor approvals).
First run: 500 neon-airbrushed cassettes.

1991 — *Hatched* (John Cevatello Remix — Unreleased)
Polished mix circulated on high-bias Maxells among Hardshells.

2 · Legendary Bootlegs & Fan Tapes

- 1983 — "Hughes Hijack" (abandoned campus; power outage mid-"Scarlet Begonias")
- 1984 — "First Club Nights" (Halloween; debut of "Nowhere to Turn")
- 1986 — "Templin Sunrise" (Camp Templin; Rabbit & the M&M's)
- 1987 — "Valley Freak-Truck '87" (flatbed Mobile Jam Ventura → Zuma)
- 1988 — "Rubin Ghost Tape" (Palomino)
- 1990 — "I'm a Man Sundays" (Winston's OB)
- 1991 — "Live at the Head Shop" (KXLU-FM)

- 1997 — “Shells at Sunset” (Topanga reunion; double-drummer)

(Full MP3 sets live in the archive.)

3 · Mystery Tape Series

- Vol. 1 — “Mystery ’83” (acoustic porch jams; Derek Povah on sax)
- Vol. 2 — “Mystery ’85” (prob. July 4th; bottle-rocket ambience)
- Vol. 3 — “Dan Briggs Sessions” (late ’82/early ’83; early “Two Magic Hands,” “Sea Dee”)

4 · Radio & Broadcasts

- 1991 — KXLU Live at the Head Shop
-

5 · Reunion & Side-Project Highlights

- 2004 — Santa Cruz Vet’s Hall (Bruce Kagan & Tony Giraldo fill-ins)
- 2012 — Valley Brew-Pub, Reseda (“Mystical Moon Redux”)

How to Contribute

Have a tape, DAT, MiniDisc, or phone memo we haven’t digitized?

Email: turtlz.archive@gmail.com

Or drop a DM in the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Family Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/137835045410

"If you're not on somebody's mixtape by breakfast, did the gig even happen?" — Steve Bryant

About the Band Members

- Steve “The Chronicler” Bryant — Bass/voice, archivist, catalyst; “I’M PSYCHED!” as ignition switch.
- Greg “Me” Brown — Keys/voice, occasional guitar; documentarian with a stubborn left hand that finally learned a right.
- Greg Herman — Electric & 12-string guitar; fuzz poet and relentless riff-engine.
- Kenny “The Fonz” Bellew — Guitar/voice; charm, bite, and the “Spice.”
- Chris Baustert — Drums (Version 1); Frankenstein kit, tribal thunder.
- Todd Myers — Drums (Version 2); fire and focus.
- Ron Russell — Drums (Version 3); college-honed heft and pocket.
- Ethel Bryant — Godmother of the shell; living-room patron saint.
- Bruce Grossman (B*A*R*F*) — Zappa-era friend; “They’re fuck-ups, but they’re my fuck-ups!”

Online Resources

Audio — The Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz Archive
https://soundcloud.com/greg-brown-37/sets/purpl-turtlz-archive-a-k-a-the

In the San Fernando Valley's '80s underground,
a misspelled band name became a flag:

Pur'p'l Tur't'lz.

From living-room chaos to Palomino nights,
Dead-show parking-lot gigs, and a *tribe of fans called*
the Hardshells, this is an inside story
of music, mayhem, brotherhood—
and the fragile magic of a scene that
burned bright and didn't last long enough.

"A memoir, a time capsule,
and an archive you can hear."

Greg Brown is a musician, producer, and educator based in Santa Cruz, California. He p played *keyboards in Pur'p'l Tur'tlz* and curated the band's *living archive of recordings, flyers, and artifacts.*

Listen to the Pur'pl Turtlz Archive

5 012345 678901

Photos — Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz Family (Facebook photos)
https://www.facebook.com/groups/137835045410/media/photos

Videos — *Too Hard to Handle* playlist
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdfla0zpEqdSHHMBT7AUvWx7QMoxAbE_K&si=IBt_c2utpwVD5og8

Book — Internet Archive edition
https://archive.org/details/too-hard-to-handle-purp-l-turt-lz-memoir-greg-brown

Merch — *Hatched* LP, mugs & more
https://direct.distrokid.com/gregbrown/

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Credits

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